

ABSOLUTION
IN THE
LIGHT OF PRIMITIVE PRACTICE

HUGH MILLER THOMPSON

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ABSOLUTION:

EXAMINED IN THE

LIGHT OF PRIMITIVE PRACTICE.

By ✓
HUGH MILLER THOMPSON,
Bishop of Mississippi.



SECOND EDITION.

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION.

THE republication of this small treatise in a cheap form has been called for by a number of men for whose judgment I have regard.

I think, myself, that the present time needs it, even more than the time of its first publication. It was intended as an *Eirenicon*, but in the heated contentions of that period could scarcely find a hearing.

It was recommended as "side reading," on the subject discussed, in one of our foremost Theological Schools, and the late BISHOP WHITTINGHAM, in a letter published since his death, thus spake of it :

BALTIMORE, *February* 18, 1873.

" . . . *On the subject of Confession* I refer you to Dr. Thompson's tract on Absolution and Confession. It states, in admirable method and clearness, the true doctrine of the Church, Primitive and Catholic, as I have known and held it these forty years."

It is needless to say that my views upon the subjects discussed remain the same. I cannot conceive of a change.

It should be said that to Marshall's *Penitential Discipline of the Primitive Church*, a book too much neglected and forgotten, this little treatise owes nearly all its value.

HUGH MILLER THOMPSON.

BATTLE HILL, JACKSON, MISS.,
April 4, 1894.

PREFACE.

THE Church claims to exercise the power of absolution. She has, therefore, some doctrine upon the subject. That this doctrine is not the scholastic doctrine, crystallized into dogma by the Council of Trent, is scarcely necessary to say.

The appeal to antiquity is always an appeal from scholasticism to dogmatism, from the inferences of human reason to historic fact. If there is any peculiarity in the position of our Church at all, it is that she deliberately makes this appeal. Without it, her ground is not tenable for a day.

She holds, therefore, whatever doctrine the primitive Church held concerning this matter of absolution, and intends to hold none other. How she practises upon the doctrine is quite another matter.

The attempt, in some quarters, to explain her doctrine, or to improve her practice by the introduction of notions and practices taken from or imitated from Romanism is to blunder inexcusably, *if no worse*. Her doctrine is not different in degree from Rome's. It is different in kind.

Confession, penitence, ministerial absolution—she teaches and practises them all. But they are only alike in name to the same things taught and practised in the Church of Rome.

It has seemed to the writer that light might be thrown upon these matters by presenting in order certain well-known practices and principles of the ancient Church. In them only can be found, in his opinion, the true explanation of the doctrine of absolution as held in his own Church.

He makes no claim to any new discovery, or any research which his clerical brethren are not able to make each for himself. He has only attempted to show the bearing of certain things with which all our clergy are supposed to be familiar, upon this particular doctrine, and, consequently, upon the formularies in the Prayer Book.

With this explanation he commits these pages to the judgment of the Church.

NEW YORK, *Ash-Wednesday*, 1872.

ABSOLUTION.

CHAPTER I.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS ON EARTH.

THE Church of God is a polity,—“the kingdom of heaven,” “the kingdom of God.” Like every other polity, it has officers and laws, courts and discipline,—the means to carry out its principles and protect itself from wrong and treachery. It is a kingdom not of the world. Its business is purely spiritual. It rules in the realm of the conscience.

This Church of God is visible, however, and deals with visible men and visible acts. But it is, as visible, the covering for what is invisible. It is the house of God on earth, seen, in which the Spirit of God dwells unseen, known only by His activities.

The visible Church of God is, therefore, sacramental. Indeed, we may say she is herself the great Sacrament, fulfilling the definition of a sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us (mankind), ordained by Christ himself as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof—and *generally*, that is in her very nature, necessary to our salvation.

She has, therefore, her outward side visible, and her inward side invisible, for which the outward exists. So close

is the union, so perfect, ideally, is the relation, that the terms of the inward are, as in both sacraments, transferred to the outward; the thing which signifies is called by the name of that which is signified.

The purpose of the Church is to administer forgiveness to man. She is the kingdom of grace, sent to reconcile men to God, to bring them to His pardon and obedience. The good news that men need be no longer outcasts, that they may be accepted and pardoned and adopted as the children of God, is the news she has to tell over all the world.

Sent to proclaim and administer an amnesty among rebels, and restore them to full citizenship again in the kingdom of God, she carries forgiveness in her hands. Without this her whole mission would be an impertinence. She preaches faith because faith is necessary before doing; she preaches repentance because a man must abhor his rebellion before turning, but she preaches both as necessary for the reception of the great gift,—remission of sins.

To get his blackened past cleared away, to have his rebellion wiped clean out, to have the assurance that it is remembered no more, that he is received as one fully and absolutely forgiven, is essential to him who would lead the new life of obedience.

The Church is not only sent to preach that there is a forgiveness, to announce the terms on which that forgiveness may be obtained, and to urge men to accept it; she is sent, also, to administer it, to sign and seal the forgiveness, to assure men that they have it in their hands.

It was logically necessary that the commission should run, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." Without that commission the Church would have had no power to do the one work that among sinful men was needed.

This commission, given to the eleven who were sent to build this kingdom of God on earth, was not a personal

commission, which was to cease with their lives. Its exercise is just as much needed in the nineteenth century as in the first. It will be always needed, because the condition and nature of men are always the same. It was given them as the heads of an Order, the Apostolic Order, which was to continue to the end of time—"Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world"—who especially were the administrators of forgiveness; and it was given them also as the representatives of the kingdom they were to begin,—the kingdom of grace and forgiveness for all mankind.

Crushed under guilt, hopeless and despairing because of sin, convicted before God and his own conscience, stained through and through, man first of all and last of all, and all the time, wants mercy and pardon. And God, to meet his sore and bitter need, established on the earth a kingdom whose law should be mercy and pardon, its banner the banner of God's omnipotent pity and love. And to this kingdom He gave the administration visibly of that pity, pledging Himself to ratify whatsoever was done by it fitly in His name; authorizing it not only to promise forgiveness to the burdened hearts of men, but visibly to assure them of that forgiveness; to seal it and make it over to them individually; to take them into a realm where forgiveness is the law, where the air they breathe is mercy, where the pardon of God is the charter of life.

"The Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins." Power on earth, because forgiveness is needed on earth. Power on earth, because the Son of Man redeemed the earth, at awful price, for His own. A power which always lasts; a power which is always needed; a power never taken from the earth, but left with His body—"the fulness of Him that filleth all in all"—when He departed; a power which is just as large and competent upon the earth to-day as it was when those words were uttered; a power continued expressly in those two utterances, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," and "Whosoever sins ye remit,

they are remitted; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained ”

It is not fair nor honest to explain away these words, nor to deny their plain force and meaning. They stand recorded, deliberately and solemnly. They are surrounded with everything that can add to their power. We cannot honestly pass them by as if they were not there. We dare not garble the gospel, and especially we dare not garble it in the very article in which, above all, it is the gospel—the announcement of forgiveness. The words are not there without a purpose. They have some meaning. If we cannot find it, so much the worse for our conception of the whole truth of God. If we are frightened from the plain words of our Lord by fear of “Romish error,” is it not more than a half confession that “Romish error” has more to say for itself than we dare confess? There must be some sense in which it is true that the power of forgiving sins remains on the earth still, and is visibly exercised before the eyes of men; some sense in which a man has a pledge and assurance that he is forgiven, that the pardon has really issued *to him*.

We said that the kingdom of God on earth has the visible side and the invisible. She therefore acts in all she does sacramentally,—acts in outward things with an inward meaning, in material things with a spiritual purpose. She acts, too, as an agent by appointment and according to the will of Him who sent her. She administers the law of pardon on the specified conditions. She did not make those conditions, and can neither extend nor restrict them. Acting according to her instructions, administering the law as the law was given, her acts are valid, and actually bind her principal,—so that whatsoever is bound on earth is bound in heaven, and whatsoever is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven.

But the outward administration is in the hands of fallible men. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” It is

possible that men, since they cannot read the heart, may administer pardon where the conditions of pardon may not exist, or may refuse to administer it where they do. In that case God is not bound by the error of His agent. The commission goes on the supposition that the conditions are complied with. But admitting this liability to mistake, it still remains, from the essentially sacramental character of the Church, that the outward act is fitly named with the name of the inward act which it signifies,—the existence of the conditions is taken for granted, and pardon is said to be given when its outward and visible sign is given, let that be what it may.

We need hardly say to any thoughtful reader, that here is no denial of the fact that God alone forgives sin. The act of the Church in the matter is ministerial and administrative for men in the flesh. The power in the case is conferred because of human infirmity, because men are in the body, and are to be reached through the avenues of the bodily senses.

God plants on earth an outpost of His kingdom. He gives that kingdom the laws of heaven. Those laws are to be administered by men, for men, in a visible and material world. The laws themselves are perfect. The administration of them may be imperfect. Nevertheless that imperfection must be accepted, else there can be no administration of these laws at all on earth. And their administration on earth is sacramental. There is an outward act which has its whole force from the unseen reality it symbolizes. This outward act is needed because men have bodies as well as souls.

The official and sacramental assurance of forgiveness, the giving over and sealing of pardon to the individual authoritatively, are demanded by the wants of human nature, and in some form or other are given by all bodies who claim to be Churches and to act in Christ's name. Men demand this much of them, and, whether or no, they are obliged to give

what is demanded,—an assurance that they consider the soul forgiven. It is not only that men ask of a Church or ministry, “What must I do to be saved?” it is, also, that they almost compel that Church or ministry to pass judgment on their doing, to decide whether they have fulfilled the requirements, whether the conditions have been complied with, and whether, therefore, the individual may be sure that, in his case, the pardon has issued.

Among those who have lost almost all idea of the sacramental character of Christianity, or who actually scout the idea, human nature asserts its understanding of the Gospel, and men examine their fellows and decide whether they may or may not count themselves pardoned. The relation of an “experience” by those who, in some bodies, are said to “indulge a hope;” the passing upon that “experience,” and deciding whether or not it is a sufficient one; and the admission afterward to baptism or communion upon it, is a real exercise, under all its disguises, of the administrative and sacramental power of forgiveness.

No man who has had much experience in dealing with the consciences of other men but knows that the trembling human soul demands the verdict of its fellows, yearns to hear its pardon pronounced by human lips, longs for the human assurance that its professed repentance and faith are real and sufficient, is not content only with the declaration that God *will* pardon or *does* pardon, but wants also to be told that God *has* pardoned, and will not be content without the assurance that He has.

The forgiveness in heaven must have its counterpart on earth. The voice that speaks in the world invisible must be uttered also in the speech of men. In the name of God the voice of man must speak to the trembling heart of man, and say, “Thy sins are forgiven;” and though that voice, because it is the voice of erring man, may be now and again mistaken, yet, nevertheless, for man’s poor sake, it is authorized in God’s name, in the exercise of that Divine charity

that hopeth all things, to pronounce the assurance to the trembling soul.

In what ways the Church administers this commission of pardon we shall inquire hereafter. Enough now to say that she is not only sent to proclaim forgiveness, but also to assure it that she has been so sent because the burdened and broken heart of man needs a living voice speaking on earth if it is to hear in the dust where it lies, and that, from the very purpose for which she was sent, from the very need she was to supply, and by the very terms of her commission, the Church is not going through empty forms, but administering a reality; none the less so, that it is ministerial and sacramental, and not in her own name, but in the name of the King.

CHAPTER II.

BAPTISM.

HAVING explained that the remission of sins, as conferred upon the Church to exercise visibly on earth, is a sacramental and ministerial forgiveness, and that the forms in which it is administered are intended to express on earth what is done in heaven, being material symbols of spiritual realities, we proceed to consider the first of those forms,—Baptism.

This sacrament is the door of admission into the kingdom of God. It is the form of naturalization by which a man renounces allegiance to all other powers—the world, the flesh, and the devil—and takes the oath of allegiance to God. In a state of alienation and rebellion, the gospel comes to him. He accepts it and determines to live by it; is converted—that is, repents and believes—and then proceeds to put himself under the gospel law as his supreme law thenceforth. The form appointed for doing so was prescribed by the Lord himself,—“Go ye and teach (disciple) all nations, *baptizing them.*” Baptism was to make men confessedly and openly Christ’s disciples, servants, and followers.

It involved, in its very idea, the sacramental assurance of the remission of sins. A man would need to be disburdened of his past before he could make a new future. He could not be admitted into the kingdom of grace and forgiveness with a load of sins upon him. In that case it would be no kingdom of grace and forgiveness to him. The rebel must be pardoned his rebellion before he can become a loyal subject or citizen.

We need hardly say that fitness on the part of the candidate is always presupposed. The supposition is that he is honest, that he really repents and really believes. His baptism goes upon that supposition. The Church would have no right to baptize him, she would be acting very falsely to her mission to baptize him if she had reason to distrust his professions and to suppose him a hypocrite.

But she cannot read the heart,—God alone knows that. She can only deal with what she was sent to deal with,—the realm of the visible. She baptizes a man, gives him the outward and visible sign of full remission for all his past sins, and admits him, a pardoned man, into the kingdom of God. If the conditions are all present, the act done visibly is done also invisibly,—the remission on earth is the counterpart of the remission in heaven.

As we remarked before, the outward acts are named from their inward reality, and therefore baptism is called “baptism for the remission of sins.”² Therefore we read of the “washing of regeneration.” Therefore it is said, “Arise and be baptized, and wash away thy sins.”

Now, the sacramental remission given in baptism, which baptism was instituted visibly to sign and seal, is directly connected with, and indeed is, the great act under the commission, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them.”

The Lord promised first to St. Peter, “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven.” This promise was fulfilled to Peter, and the keys were actually given when the Lord commissioned the whole eleven, St. Peter among them. Whatever it meant to St. Peter it meant to all the rest, for when the promise was ful-

²Ὁμολογοῦμεν ἐν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.—*Creed of Constantinople*, A.D. 581.

filled the same words were spoken to all. And yet there was a meaning in the fact that the *promise* was given to St. Peter first. That meaning is seen on the day of Pentecost, when St. Peter actually first uses the keys, delivers the first sermon, admits to the first baptism, and so first opens the kingdom of heaven. He then "loosed on earth," when it is recorded, "Then they that gladly received his word were *baptized*, and the same day there were added about three thousand souls."

Baptism is itself, therefore, the first and great *absolution*, the grand act of ministerial remission of sins. To remember this will help us to understand the real nature of absolution, for all absolution must be a thing in its nature essentially the same under all forms.

The Church of Rome founds her doctrine of priestly absolution on the commission we have quoted, and denies that that commission is exercised unless when auricular confession is practised, and judicial absolution is issued upon such confession. But it is manifest that if baptism be for the remission of sins, as the Catholic Creed, following Scripture, declares, then it is administered under the one commission, and is itself an exercise of that commission, a real issue of absolution, and that the most marked and significant absolution which the Church can confer.

The ancient writers place baptism on the same ground with all other forms of absolution, deriving all from the same commission as above. Cyprian denies the validity of heretical baptism, on the express ground that heretics are not in the line of those to whom it was said, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them."² Indeed, throughout the

² Sed et ipsa interrogatio quae fit in Baptismo, testis est veritatis. Nam quum dicimus "Credis in vitam aeternam et Remissionem peccatorum per sanctam Ecclesiam?" intelligimus remissionem peccatorum non nisi in Ecclesiâ dari: apud Haereticos autem, *ubi Ecclesia non sit*, non posse peccata dimitti.—*Cyprian, Epist. lxx. ad Episc. Numid.* p. 190.

Scripsisti mihi, Frater carissime, desiderans significari tibi motum animi nostri quid nobis videatur de Haereticorum baptismo, *qui foris*

whole discussion which he carried on upon the question of heretical baptism, he makes this the ground of his argument, that the heretics are not in the line of the commission, and therefore cannot grant the great remission or absolution of baptism.

Cyril of Alexandria, expounding the same words, says: "According to my opinion men, endowed with the same Spirit, remit or retain sins in two ways: They call to baptism those who are worthy by a good life and a true faith, or they refuse those who are unworthy; or, in another way, they remit or retain sins when they punish the sinning children of the Church, and pardon them again upon repentance."³

The Novatian sectarians of the third and fourth centuries are usually considered schismatics, and not heretics. They separated from the Church, not because it taught false doctrines, but because it was not holy enough for them. It re-

positi, et extra Ecclesiam constituti, vindicant sibi rem nec juris sui nec potestatis, quod nos nec ratum possumus nec legitimum judicare, quando hoc apud eos esse constet illicitum, etc.—Idem, Epist. lxxiii. ad Jubaian, p. 198.

Quod si aliquis illud opponit, ut dicat, eandem Novatianam legem tenere, quam Catholica Ecclesia teneat, eodem symbolo quo et nos, baptizare; eundem nosse Deum Patrem, eundem Filium Christum, eundem Spiritum Sanctum, ac propter hoc usurpare eum potestatem baptizandi posse, quod videatur in interrogatione baptismi a nobis non discrepare: sciat quisquis hoc opponendum putat, primum non esse unam nobis et schismaticis symboli legem; neque eandem interrogationem. Nam quum dicunt, "Credis in remissionem peccatorum et vitam aeternam per sanctam Ecclesiam?" *Mentiuntur in interrogatione quando non habent Ecclesiam.* —*Idem, Epist. lxxvi. ad Magnum, p. 296.*

³ Ἀφίᾳσι γε μὴν ἁμαρτίας, ἣ τοι κατέχουσιν οἱ πνευματοφόροι, κατὰ δύο τρόπους, κατὰ γε διάνοιαν ἐμὴν· ἢ γὰρ καλοῦσιν ἐπὶ τὸ βάπτισμα τοὺς, οἷς ἂν ἤδη καὶ τούτου τυχεῖν ὠφείλετο διὰ τὴν τοῦ βίου σεμνότητα, καὶ τὸ δεδοκιμασμένον εἰς πίστιν ἢ διακωλύουσί τινας καὶ τῆς θείας χάριτος ἐξείργουσιν ἐτι οὐψω τέως γεγονότας ξίους· ἢ καὶ καθ' ἕτερον τροπον ἀφίᾳσι τε καὶ κρατοῦσι ἁμαρτίας, ἐπιτιμῶντες μὲν ἁμαρτάνουσι τοῖς τῆς ἐκκλησίας τέκνοις, μετανοοῦσι δὲ συγγινώσκοντες.—*Cyril. Alex. lib. xii. in Joan. xx. 23.*

admitted "the lapsed" (those who had fallen away under the stress of the bitter persecution of Decius) after due trial of their sincere repentance. To this the Novatians objected, claiming that though God might forgive these "laspers," the Church could not, and that she defiled herself by admitting them to communion. Therefore they withdrew in that spirit, never uncommon, which finds expression in the words, "I am holier than thou." In process of the controversy they were led to deny a place for repentance and readmission into the visible Church, not only to "laspers," but to all guilty of great crimes.

The Novatians, therefore, as one sees, were not schismatics merely. Like all schisms, the schism of Novatus, like that of Donatus afterward, issued in heresy. That heresy was the denial of the power of the keys to the Church. It held that while God in heaven may forgive certain sins, the Church on earth cannot forgive them, and must forever exclude from her communion those guilty of them.

But the Church, on the other hand, has always held that what may be forgiven in heaven may also be forgiven on earth, that what God can pardon men can, that those fit to enter the Church triumphant are also fit to commune with the Church militant, and, therefore, she refuses her ministerial absolution to no sin whatever, on the evidence of sincere repentance and amendment of life.

And she pressed the Novatians with the text of the great commission, and brought the argument home to them from their own practice. St. Ambrose, writing against them, in his book, *De Penitentia*, asks, "Why baptize ye, if sins cannot be remitted by men? For in baptism there is remission of all sins. What difference is it whether priests assume this power as given them in baptism, or in the administration of penance?"⁴ Here again, as above, the absolution

⁴ Cur baptizatis, si per hominem peccata dimitti non licet? In baptismo utique remissio peccatorum omnium est: quid interest, utrum per

granted in baptism, and that granted to returning penitents, are both considered as different exercises of the same authority, both founded on the same words.

It is only a Novatian error to claim that the power of binding and loosing is exercised only in what is technically called absolution,—the pronouncement of a specified form by a priest. The power of the keys, the authority conferred in the words, “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained,” has its great and characteristic exercise in baptism. There the great remission (as the ancients called baptism) is given. There the Church stands forth especially in her character of the minister on earth of God’s grace and forgiveness.⁵ It follows that, whatever be the character of the absolution in baptism, whatever be the meaning and nature of it in that sacrament, the same must be its character, meaning, and nature all through.

Now, the absolution given by the Church in baptism is *administrative*. She is doing on earth what she humbly believes God is sanctioning in heaven. She confers the outward sign. God, present, reads the heart, and He himself confers or withdraws the inward grace. The Church deals with the visible. That is all she can do. She leaves God to deal with the invisible. She washes the body, she trusts God washes the soul. She is sure, on His own word, that He does, if the soul is willing and ready. She can but take

poenitentiam, an per lavacrum hoc jus sibi datum Sacerdotes vindicent? Unum in utroque mysterium est (Quidam MSS., ministerium).—*S. Ambrose, De Poenitentiâ*, cap. viii. § 36.

⁵ Baptismus, vero quod est Sacramentum *Remissionis* peccatorum.—*Aug. De Bapt.* lib. v. cap. 21.

Paschae tempore Presbyter et Diaconus per Parochias dare *Remissionem* peccatorum (hoc est baptismum), et ministerium implere consueverunt etiam praesente Episcopo.—*Conc. Roman.* can. vii. *Coleter.* vol. i. p. 282.

Parvuli baptizantur in *Remissionem* peccatorum.—*Origen in Luc.* *Hom.* xiv.

it for granted that it is, when the man so vows and professes. Therefore, on the supposition that he is dealing truly, she pronounces his sins forgiven in the name of the Lord, declares him washed and cleansed and new-born into the kingdom of mercy and light, transacts before the eyes of men visibly what she believes is going on invisibly before the eyes of angels.

“But the man’s sins may not be forgiven after all.” True enough. He may be, as in the early day was one of the first men baptized into the visible Church, Simon Magus, yet “in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” But it does not change the nature of baptism, that one man or ten thousand men have made a mock of it. All that is said of it, is said on the understanding that it is rightly used and received. It does not annihilate the act of amnesty, that many a rebel makes oath under it and remains still a rebel at heart.

The Church still stands on earth the visible type of God’s walled kingdom in the eternal heavens, a poor, failing, feeble, earthly type of a high, eternal reality. Admission to the type God intends to be admission to the reality, membership in the earthly kingdom of heaven to be also membership in the heavenly kingdom. And baptism, which admits into the kingdom below, is also the visible symbol of the admission into the kingdom above. As men have to deal with it, it only concerns admission to the kingdom below,—it is *administrative*. They are men, and may deal with it imperfectly. But dealt with sincerely, as men admit into the struggling kingdom here, so God admits to the great kingdom eternal, and as the man enters forgiven into the visible Church, God receives him, coming truly, and remits in heaven what is also remitted here.

CHAPTER III.

THE CHURCH.

BAPTISM admits a man into the kingdom of grace and forgiveness. The law of that kingdom is pardon. Theoretically, all its members are in a state of grace. They are all pardoned. Practically, we know it is not so. There are those in the kingdom who are not of it. But the visible Church cannot read the heart. She can but go on what she sees, and the theory of her constitution and nature is that she is made up of those who are living under God's law of pardon. Although, as a matter of fact, she knows that all her members are not under the law, yet, in any individual case, where she knows nothing to the contrary, she must consider the person a saved man. We read, with reference to admission into this kingdom, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, that "the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved." In the original it is literally *the saved*.¹

In agreement with this idea, we find St. Paul, in his epistles, addressed to the visible Church in Corinth, Philippi, Colosse, and Ephesus, addressing the brethren as "saints." "The saints which are at Philippi," for instance. It is a common title for all who are baptized and in the communion of the visible Church, although, as is clear from the tenor of some of the epistles, there were many among them (as in Corinth especially) who were not entitled to the name.

¹ Ὁ δὲ κύριος προσετίθει τοῖς σωζομένους καθ' ἡμέραν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.
Acts, ii. 47.

In the same way St. Peter addresses his first epistle to the "elect," where it is clear he is addressing the whole body of the baptized. In truth, as one can see on a moment's reflection, the epistles were addressed to all the members of the various Churches, and all the promises, warnings, exhortations, titles, were the common property of every member of the Church,—they were the "holy generation," the "royal priesthood," the "peculiar people." They were the "holy temple," the "building of God." They were the "saints," the "faithful," the "elect." And yet we need only the epistles themselves to show us that practically the ideal of the Church was very far from being realized under the Apostles.

A great deal of confusion arises, unnecessarily, from failing to remember that the New Testament was written in the visible Church, and for the visible Church. It seems strange that the *epistles*, especially, which are addressed by name to visible Churches and their members, should be treated with entire forgetfulness that their promises, threats, warnings—indeed, all they contain—are specifically applied to baptized people and *to none others*, unless those others are carefully named. And the whole theory of those epistles is that those inside the visible fold are *saved*, are pardoned, are in a state of grace, are "washed and sanctified," are delivered from the power of sin, and dwell in the light and life of God.

As we have said, it was just as well known then as it is now that all baptized people were not such. But the visible Church, the outward sign of the eternal, invisible kingdom of God, can only go on visible facts. She was obliged, at the beginning, as she will be to the end, to take the presumption of her position, to name the thing signifying by the name of the thing signified, acting sacramentally, and to consider her members, unless in each case there is proof to the contrary, as pardoned, saved, and in a state of grace. It is to pardoned people, to people presumed, at least, with-

out question, to be pardoned, that all her means of grace are offered. They have positively no meaning whatever except to these. They are admitted that they may partake of them. They are pardoned at the door that they may be fit to receive them.

“But men within the visible Church, even the best, are not free from sin.” That is true. They have not come into the Church because they are perfect, but because they are imperfect. The Church is a hospital, in one point of view, of souls sick unto death, who have been taken in to be cured. And they are taken in subject, as yet, to all the weaknesses and failings of a sinful nature. Nevertheless, the express contract which they make at admission is that they will fight their sins, and, in God’s strength, live in God’s service with living repentance and living faith.

While faithfully struggling in this warfare they are entitled to all the helps given in the “means of grace,”—the worship, the sacraments, the ordinances of the kingdom. It was to give them such helps that all these things were established. They have their value from that purpose. And while the fight honestly goes on, no matter how weak the fighter, he finds the help these means were given to convey. It is only when he turns traitor and gives up to the devil, when all his sins come back upon him, because he has gone back to them, that these means convey nothing to him except condemnation.

And, among all the graces which the means of grace convey to the struggling soul, this is not the least,—the reiterated and renewed sense of forgiveness. They are intended, among other things, to keep alive in the soul the sense of its forgiveness, its near relation to God; to assure it again and again, daily, habitually, that, possessed of true faith and true repentance, it may cast aside all slavish fear, and live and work with the living and abiding conviction of pardon and peace. Each participation in the Holy Communion, each act of worship or praise, each reading of the

word and promises of God, ought to convey anew the assurance of the soul's deliverance. For it is admitted into the kingdom whose law is forgiveness. It has come not to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion, not to Jerusalem in bondage but to Jerusalem free, not to the law but to the Gospel, not to slavery but to the adoption of sons. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, members of His body, His flesh, and His bones.

Thus, in the New Testament, the Church presents itself as the hedged-in kingdom of God, where God's grace, mercy, and pity reigned supreme. Outside was the evil world. Inside were those saved from that evil world, delivered from sin and from the fear sin wrought. The Church stands there a harbor of refuge, the ark in the deluge. She calls on all to fly to her arms for succor. She assures them that within her embrace there is forgiveness for all transgression, and a new life of holiness. She repeats the cry of Her Master, "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden;" for to come to Him was, according to His command, to come to her.

Baptism is, therefore, the sacramental sign of forgiveness at entrance. But inasmuch as a man is not delivered from the power of sin, but continues, though a faithful Christian, with true faith and true repentance to yield to temptation and sin daily, in thought, word, or deed, he needs also the assurance of forgiveness daily. And this assurance is abundantly furnished him in the kingdom of grace.

We are not now speaking of sins which separate the soul from God, of sins which are *deadly*, breaches of the law on which the pardoned soul stands, sins which are treason against the King, and which renew the rebellion and forfeit the Christian position. We are speaking of those remains of sin which, in a man with living faith and hearty repentance, and under the sanctifying influence of God's grace, still inhere in his imperfect nature, and which, if allowed to go on, will poison that nature to its ruin again.

For these there is absolution in the word and doctrine in the daily prayers—public or private, in the confession of them to God, in the scriptures that announce God's promises, and especially in the Holy Communion, which, rightly received, holds the soul in living communion with its Saviour. For these, to the sincere believer, there is no condemnation in the kingdom of grace. Of his pardon of these he is assured by every official act of the Church, of which he is a living member. The great tide of life-giving pardon surging through her heart, goes to the utmost extremity, visits the smallest member, and, while the Holy Communion lasts, assures him that he is freely pardoned.

“For the daily sins,” says Augustine, “from which no man's life is free, the daily prayer of the faithful obtains pardon.”²

And St. Ambrose writes: “Some sins are remitted in the saying of the daily prayer, ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’”³

St. Augustine again has the same, speaking of various kinds of sin, some of which deserve reproof, and some excommunication and penance; and others, “from which the life cannot be free, are cured by the daily medicine which He left when He taught us to say, ‘Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.’”⁴ Again he says, of two sorts of repentance for sins after baptism: “There is another daily repentance. And where can we show it? I know not where

² De quotidianis brevibus levibusque peccatis, sine quibus haec vita non ducitur, quotidiana oratio Fidelium satisfacit.—*Aug. Enchirid.* c. lxxi. p. 163.

³ Si alia peccata habuerit, quae quotidie dimittantur in oratione dicenti, Dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.—*Ambrose, Exhort. ad Poenit.*

⁴ Postremo nisi essent quaedam, sine quibus haec vita non agitur, non quotidianam medelam poneret in oratione quam docuit, ut dicamus, Dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.—*Aug. De Fide et Operibus*, c. xxvi. p. 140.

I can better show it than in the daily prayer which the Lord taught us to pray to the Father.”⁵ This prayer, to which so much is attributed, was called by the ancients “the *prayer of the faithful*,”⁶ the peculiar prayer left as a legacy to His own true disciples by our Lord.

In speaking this way of sins of daily incursion, St. Augustine and the other fathers are not to be understood as teaching that they are of trifling consequence. It is in this very connection that Augustine uses the expression, “A small leak neglected will sink a ship, as well as a boisterous wave.” They are rather warnings against the little sins to which the best men are exposed, against neglecting or forgetting them, and allowing them to grow. They are calling men to repent of them, to ask God to forgive them, and persuading them daily and habitually to fight them.

But what they wish to assure them of is, that these sins, in the kingdom of grace, to the struggling and failing but faithful souls, are forgiven by the very law of the kingdom, to sincere repentance daily. They are not to remain as a guilty burden on conscience. God remits them to His believing children upon their asking. They are not recorded against them. Daily confession and daily prayer, keeping the soul in living communion with its Saviour, procures daily remission. While that living communion is kept, all the gracious promises belong to it. It can claim all things in

⁵ Est alia poenitentia quotidiana, et ubi illam ostendimus? Non habeo ubi melius ostendam quam in Oratione quotidianâ, ubi Dominus orare nos docuit, quid ad Patrem dicamus ostendit, et in his verbis posuit, Dimitte nobis debita nostra sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris.—*Aug. Hom. xxvii. ex. I. p. 954.*

⁶ Ἐπειτα ἐπιθεῖς τὴν ἐυχὴν τῶν πιστῶν ἐνταῦθα ἐπαύετο, ὡς κορωνίδα τινὰ καὶ σύνδεσμον ὑπὲρ πάντων τὴν ἐυχὴν ποιησάμενος.—*Chrysos. Homil. x. in Coloss. p. 234.*

⁷ Hoc facit sentina neglecta, quod facit fluctus irruens: paullatim per sentinam intrat, sed diu intrando et non exhauriendo mergit navem.—*Aug. Tract. in Joan. xvi. p. 284.*

the treasures of mercy for its own. It lives under the law, and while conscientiously doing so, the law is supreme,—and the law is *pardon*.

But the great sacramental assurance of forgiveness offered in the kingdom of grace is the Holy Communion. That sacrament belongs and applies only to the truly repentant and the truly faithful,—not to the sinless, but to those who are struggling faithfully in the good fight against their sins. Admission to it is evidence that a man is a living member of Christ, and an heir of salvation. It is the Father's table spread for His sons, the great unchangeable sign and symbol of the fatherhood and the adoption. It is the crowning and culminating act of visible communion, and none can have communion unless his sins be forgiven. In the Church, therefore, we may say that all services are absolvatory. None but absolved souls can be true members of the Church. In idea, every Church member is a pardoned man. If he is not, he has no right or title to be in the Church.

All her prayers and praises; her teaching, reading, praying; the word and doctrine; and especially the Holy Communion, the central act of living communion with Christ, convey assurance of pardon, and over and over again sign and seal pardon. The force of the words, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them," are not spent in one act or form,—they pervade the whole life of the Church, and every official act she does under that commission is an act that releases from the bonds of sin.

In other words, the Church herself is the world's absolution, and she offers the great absolution to all who will accept it; and to those who do accept it, and come within the kingdom of grace, she gives it continually as their birth-right. Pardon belongs to them. They inherit it by the adoption. She tells them so, assures them of the fact day in and out, and especially gathers them about the Lord's table, and delivers into their hands its emphatic, visible seal.

Theologians have spoken of the absolution of the word

and doctrine, the absolution of prayer, the absolution of the eucharist, the absolution of imposition of hands. They are really all one in kind. These absolutions belong to the *faithful*, they apply solely to them in a state of grace and forgiveness. They are for members of the body, and none else. They are means to assure the justified and regenerate that they are justified and regenerate, that the relation of sons continues, that the sins of human frailty and daily incursion do not separate between them and God, since they are daily repented of, and, all the time, by the law of the kingdom, forgiven. To all these assurances, these visible signs of forgiveness, they are entitled by their membership. No man has the right to refuse them.

And of all these outward signs on earth of what is done in heaven, the Holy Communion is the great and supreme one. The others vary, and have varied, in different places and ages. This, established by the Lord, never varies. It is the one unalterable, visible declaration to all entitled to it, that their sins are forgiven.

The early writers all teach us this view of Church membership,—that forgiveness of sins belongs to it, that it is granted and assured in every means of grace. St. Jerome says: “By the word of God, the testimony of the Scriptures, and exhortations to virtues.”⁸ St. Augustine says: “By daily prayer,” especially “the prayer of the faithful,”—*Our Father*. St. Cyprian says: “By the blood of the Lord and the cup of salvation.”⁹ The meaning of it all is, that the Church is the household of the redeemed, that living

⁸ Solvunt autem eos (*i. e.*, peccatorum funes) Apostoli sermone Dei, et testimoniis Scripturarum, et exhortatione virtutum.—*Hierom. in Jesai.* xiv. 17, p. 254.

⁹ Epoto sanguine Domini, et poculo salutari exponatur memoria veteris hominis et fiat oblivio conversationis pristinae saecularis; et maestum pectus ac triste, quod prius peccatis angentibus premebatur, divinae indulgentiae laetitia resolvatur.—*Cyp. Epist. lxxiii. ad Caecilium.* p. 279.

membership in her is a state of forgiveness, and that to all the visible and sensible assurances of forgiveness she administers, every member has a right, and that, in every means of grace, the soul, with true repentance and true faith, is entitled to find and claim and appropriate to itself, the grace of forgiveness flowing from all.

CHAPTER IV.

EXCOMMUNICATION.

THE Church of God, like every other society, must have the power of discipline. In her, however, this power must be spiritual. She can deal with men's souls only,—not with their bodies. It cannot affect their rights in life, in body, or in goods.

The Holy Communion is the root and centre of her means of discipline, being the inmost mystery she administers, and participation in it being the evidence and the seal of membership in her fold. Her final act of discipline can be only expulsion from her communion. She can only cast out the unworthy. Excommunication is therefore the ultimate punishment for offences, as far as the visible Church can punish.*

We have said she is the kingdom of God, in which the law is forgiveness, and where the theory is that all are in the state of grace. Though imperfect and erring, yet the fact that they are pardoned remains, and for the remains of sin the means of grace afford assurance, to the repentant and faithful, of daily pardon. But there are sins which are high treason against the kingdom; sins which forfeit the grace of pardon, which deliver a man over to the power of evil again; sins for which there must be discipline; sins that demand severer treatment, that the soul may be saved; sins which are outrages on the Church's purity, on Christian

* *Spirituali gladio superbi et contumaces resecantur, dum de ecclesia ejiciuntur.—Cyprian. Epist. lxii. ad Pompon.*

character, and on the soul. Those guilty of these sins were expelled from the Church.

In the exercise of her discipline she rebuked sometimes, sometimes she suspended from her communion; but these were for faults of lighter dye. For great crimes, or for a sinful course persisted in against all rebuke and warning she had absolute expulsion. Her charter for this is found in the words of her Lord, in the eighteenth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel.² Here the case is provided for. The final act is to put the sinner out of Christian fellowship, to count him as "a heathen and a publican."

St. Paul acts upon this charter in the case of the incestuous Corinthian. As we read in the fifth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he had "judged already concerning him that hath so done this deed," and delivered him "unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus;" and he goes on to warn the Corinthian Church not to keep company so much as to eat with certain kinds of sinners, but "put away from among yourselves that wicked person." There is a like case in his First Epistle to St. Timothy, where he mentions having excommunicated Hymenaeus and Alexander in the same way.

This power of protecting herself from unworthy members, of vindicating her own purity and the honor of her Lord, of punishing notorious sinners by casting them out, was essential to the Church, and inheres in her as a body

² "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church: but if he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall he bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

living under law. Her law is holiness, and when that law is outraged by those who have sworn to keep it, she is able to vindicate her mission on earth only by cutting them off from her fellowship. Accordingly, in the early Church, from the days of the Apostles, we find the Church exercising this power,—warning, suspending, and, at the last, expelling.

“How severe is our discipline against offenders,” writes Origen against Celsus, “especially against such as offend by incontinence, who are expelled from all communion with us. If the venerable institution of Pythagoras set up cenotaphs for those departed from that philosophy, counting them as dead, so we bewail as lost and dead to God those overcome by lust or any other enormity.”³

Tertullian, speaking of the same thing in his “Apology,” says: “There also (in the Church) are exhortations, rebukes, and the Divine censure. For sentence is passed with the greatest gravity, and as if among those certain of the presence of God, and it is the highest presumption of the future judgment that if any sin, he is cut off from all communion of prayer, and of the assembly, and of every holy office.”⁴

We do not care to multiply quotations. It is a case ad-

³ Ἦθια δ' ἐστὶν ἀντοῖς ἀγωγή καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτανόντων, καὶ μάλιστα ἄκολαστανόντων, οὓς ἀπελεύνουσι τοῦ κοινοῦ οἱ κατὰ τὸν κέλσον παραπλήσιοι τοῖς ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς τὰ ἐπιρρητότατα ἐπιδεικνυμένοις; καὶ τὸ μὲν τῶν Πυθαγορείων σεμνὸν διδασκάλειον κενοτάφια τῶν ἀποστάντων τῆς σφῶν φιλοσοφίας κατεσκεύαζε, λογιζόμενον νεκροὺς ἀυτοὺς γεγονέναι· οὗτοι δὲ ὡς ἀπολωλότας καὶ τεθνηκότας τῷ θεῷ τοὺς ὑπ' ἀσελγείας ἢ τινος ἀτόπου νενικημένους ὡς νεκροὺς πένηθουσι· καὶ ὡς ἐκ νεκρῶν ἀναστάντες, ἐὰν ἀξιόλογον ἐνδείξωνται μεταβολὴν χρόνῳ πλείονι τῶν κατ'ἀρχᾶς εἰσαγομένων ὕστερον ποτε προσίενται· εἰς οὐδεμίαν ἀρχὴν καὶ προστασίαν τῆς λεγομένης ἐκκλησίας τοῦ θεοῦ καταλέγοντες τοὺς φθάσαντας μετὰ τὸ προσεληλυθέναι τῷ λόγῳ ἐπταικέναι.—*Origen contra Celsum*. Lib. iii.

⁴ *Ibidem* etiam exhortationes, castigationes, et censura Divina. Nam et judicatur magno cum pondere, ut apud certos de Dei conspectu; summumque futuri iudicii praejudicium est, si quis ita deliquerit, ut a communicatione orationis et conventus, et omnis sancti commercii relegatur.—*Tertull. Apolog. advers. Gent.* cap. 39.

mitted, that the primitive Church habitually exercised this power of excommunication. The fathers are full of it, and the councils command, define, and limit it. The occasion of one of the earliest and most notorious schisms, that of the Novatians, arose from the taking back of certain classes of offenders who had been expelled, classes which the Novatians claimed should never be restored. What we wish to inquire is, what the effect of this excommunication was supposed to be? What happened when a man was excommunicated?

We must remember, in the first place, that excommunication was not inflicted for light offences. It was the last weapon in the armory. It was used only against those whose sin was such as to argue treason against Jesus Christ the King; sin such as cut the soul off from God; such as amounted to abandonment of the Christian character. Such sin was some open breach of the plain Ten Commandments. The sixteenth book of Bingham's "Christian Antiquities" is taken up with an exhibition of ancient canons, showing the various breaches of the Commandments for which excommunication was pronounced, and they cover all the "presumptuous sins," the plain, undoubted transgressions of law of which men can be guilty.

People falling into such sin, of whatever rank or station, were excluded from the communion of the faithful. The Church would not even admit them within her doors; would not receive their offerings, or defile her altars with their oblations; would not let their eyes behold her worship.

Now, St. Paul's words, before quoted, will show us what was believed to occur when such sinners were excommunicated. They were believed to be "delivered unto Satan." In other words, the Church was the kingdom of God. The world was, to Christians, the kingdom of Satan. Within was pardon, mercy, the grace of God, the means of obtaining that grace. Outside were sin, temptation, dogs, sorcerers,—evil and the power of evil.

It may seem strange to us, but this was the faith of the early Christians, as it is the doctrine of the New Testament. The kingdom of God was a reality. So also was the kingdom of Evil. Peace, pardon, absolution, in God's kingdom, were all realities. Evil, the power of evil, the deliverance over to evil, were all realities also. To call the world outside the Church the kingdom of Satan, was not, to an early Christian, to use a figure of speech.

Expelled from the Church, he was expelled from all the means of grace, from all sacramental assurances of forgiveness. He was put back into the evil kingdom from which he had fled at his baptism. He was cut off from all fellowship with what was good, from the one brotherhood where evil was opposed. His associates were heathens, misbelievers, the aliens from God henceforth. The Church even cast his gifts out after him. She would not pollute herself with his offerings.⁵

⁵ In days of pious fairs, festivals, and lotteries, and especially in days when a godless "pew holder" sometimes is allowed to control a "church," it is strange enough to go back to the old rule on this matter:

"A bishop must know whose gifts he ought to receive, and whose not. He shall not receive the gifts of *fraudulent dealers*. Neither shall he receive the gifts of whoremongers, nor the oblations of coveters and adulterers, for the sacrifices of such are abomination to the Lord. Nor the oblations of such as afflict the widow and oppress the fatherless. . . . He shall also refuse all corrupters and *lawyers that plead for injustice*, and makers of idols, and thieves, and unrighteous publicans, and those that use frauds in weight or measure; all murderers, and hangmen, and *unrighteous judges*; drunkards, blasphemers, usurers, and, in a word, every wicked man who lives in rebellion against God."—*Apostolical Constitutions*, Book IV. c. vi.

There are men whose whole manner of life and method of business is an outrage on human and divine law and right, and yet these men are allowed, even begged and flattered, to give of their evil and accursed gains to holy uses. They seem to themselves to sanctify the whole by giving a part, and the religion that allows them so to do is conspiring to ruin them eternally.

The fact that their whole life is accursed should be brought to them

It was a terrible sentence, and was executed only on full knowledge and consideration. A man could not be excommunicated except he were regularly tried and convicted, or unless the sin were one of public notoriety, or unless he voluntarily confessed it. It was a sentence which could be pronounced only by the Bishop, and it was not a sentence which the Church originated. She considered herself only doing, in the realm of the material what was done already in the world spiritual. The man had already excommunicated himself. His sin against God, his treason against his king, had cut him off already. He had no part or lot in the kingdom of Grace. He was in it, indeed, while his sin was concealed, but not of it.

The Church merely accepted the fact as she found it. She did not consider that her excommunication made the separation, but that her excommunication formally declared separation already existing. It was universally held that an unjust excommunication was no excommunication at all. What was claimed was that the Church, to guard herself from becoming a nest of unclean birds, to vindicate the insulted majesty of a merciful God, to mark her detestation of sin, to warn those for whose souls she watched, and to keep

by the absolute refusal to permit any part of their ill-gotten wealth to pollute the altar of God.

If the Church ever gets faith enough to stand again on divine and not worldly principles, she will find this bit of ancient discipline, which brands the evil gains of evil men with outspoken condemnation, to be one of the most powerful weapons of discipline in her hands.

At present she is borrowing money on all hands from the devil to build altars to God, and the great trouble is, that the devil insists on security for principle and interest, and sometimes forecloses on his mortgage and takes the whole. If it were not for this, it might be some satisfaction to think one had cheated him out of his money for a good purpose. But he has never been easy to cheat, and looks sharply after every interest, church or charity, in which he has invested a dollar, and in due time claims his own.

the walls between a holy Church and an evil world secure, was bound, when she knew, in any way, of sin among her members,—marked and plain transgression of the plain law—to expel the sinner from her fellowship.

She was not inquisitive to hunt for sins. She compelled no confession. She warned every man, and left it on his own conscience if he dared go on sacrilegiously using holy things while secretly living in sin. But when the case by any means became known to her, she arose and vindicated the majesty and purity of her law of holiness,—on Emperor⁶ and on slave equally. She led the transgressor to the door, and literally put him out of the Church into the place where he belonged. And excommunicated in one Church, he was excommunicated in all.⁷ He could be restored to communion again, as the canons testify, only in the Church where he had been excluded, because there was full knowledge of the case, and there all the facts were known.

The multiplication of rival sects has destroyed discipline among Christians, at present, in many countries. If one sect rejects a man its rival, especially if he be a man of influence or wealth, stands only too eager to take him in. Among sects which claim only a human origin and authority excommunication means nothing more than the expulsion of a man from a social club. It has no terrors, and no disciplinary power to bring a man to a sense of the enormity of his sins. It is no longer delivering him over to Satan, or, indeed, to anything which he fears.

⁶ See the well-known story of the excommunication of the Emperor Theodosius the Great, by St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and the humble submission of the Emperor to the censures of the Church.

⁷ As a specimen of this :

Placuit cunctis, ut ab eo episcopo quis accipiat communionem, a quo abstentus in crimine aliquo fuerit. Quod si alius episcopus praesumpserit eum admittere, illo adhuc minime faciente, vel consentiente, a quo fuerat communione privatus, sciat se hujusmodi causas inter fratres eum status sui periculo praestaturum.—*Conc. Illiber. c. liii.*

It was far otherwise in the days of a Church which was one over all the world. Spiritual though the punishment was, and unsupported by any temporal pains or penalties, to the faith that grasped the reality of spiritual things it was very real and terrible. The branding of his sin by the Church was the visible sign of what took place in the court of heaven, and the casting him out for it from fellowship below was taken to be only the earthly type of what was done in heaven. The man's sins came back upon him to crush him. He had broken the contract on which they were forgiven. He had right no longer to the daily assurance of forgiveness given in the word and doctrine and sacraments. They were all to him empty forms. He was making a mock of them while he remained within.

So the startling precision of a pronounced excommunication declared his position. It fell upon him like a voice from heaven. And like Adam after the fall, he was driven out of the garden into the wilderness, and a flaming sword drove him back from access to "the tree of life," the altar of the Lord.

CHAPTER V.

PENITENCE.

BUT God's mercy never forsakes a man while living. And the Church, administering the law of God, cannot forsake him either. She smites that she may heal. Even in her heaviest infliction she thinks only of the sinner's well-being. Her blows fall in mercy, not in wrath, and she yearns with a mother's heart over the children she must punish. So, when St. Paul had written to the Church at Corinth to excommunicate the incestuous member, and commanded them "not to keep company with such an one, no, not so much as to eat," about a year after, when the excommunication had wrought its effect, writes to the same Church his Second Epistle, to take the person back and "comfort him, lest he be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow."

Following Apostolic example, the purpose and hope of the Church in all her discipline, even the severest, was to bring the sinner back again to repentance. The man put out of the fold was not hopeless. He might return. The Church, unlike the Novatian schismatics, held that there was restoration, even for the worst offenders. But the road was a hard and painful one, and arranged to test his constancy and sincerity by the severest tests.

His first step was to be "admitted to penance,"—to be allowed to enter upon this road. He made his appearance at the church door, which he was not allowed to enter. He besought "the faithful," as they passed into those courts from which he was shut out, to intercede for him. With

every sign of sorrow and a broken heart he pleaded that he might be allowed to become a penitent and admitted to undergo "the discipline."

If his sin was peculiarly atrocious he was allowed to make these supplications for months, and sometimes for years, without an answer. He and those like him—cast out and seeking to be put upon the road to return, but not yet admitted—were "the mourners," or "weepers," as the word was, sheltering under the shadow of the church porch, but not allowed to enter, although the heathen were. But on the sincerely expressed desire—at once in most cases probably, sooner or later even in the worst—the sinner was put on his course of discipline. He was admitted inside the church doors, and placed in the lowest place, among the heathen, the heretics, the Jews, and the unbelievers, and was dismissed when the services fit for such to hear were ended, with a prayer for his pardon, and that he might sincerely repent and be restored to the favor of God.

When thus admitted he took his rank among "the penitents." The bishop was the officer to admit him, to decide the length of time he must continue in that class, according to the gravity of his offence, and he was solemnly put upon his probation, by prayer and the imposition of hands.

Before the whole congregation he stood a sinner confessed, in the place of the penitent and in a penitential garb. The particular crime for which he was doing penance might not be known. He might publicly confess it if he chose, or it might be already a notorious thing. But though known to the bishop, of course, it was not thought wise or proper always to publish it to the world. But that it was some great and grievous crime any man coming into the church could see.

"Those whom you see," says St. Augustine, "performing penance have committed gross sins (*scelera*), adultery, or such enormities, whence they do penance. For, if

their sins were light, daily prayer would suffice to atone for them.”¹

This was called the *exomologesis*, or public penance, done before the eyes of all men to attest the sinner's sincerity in his repentance, his hatred and abhorrence of his crimes, his humility and heart-broken sorrow. How different it is from the huddled-up “penances” which are done in the Church of Rome, how different from the whispered confessions and the concealment there, which makes the confessional a sanctuary of sin, and the priest a *particeps criminis* with the sinner, we need not stop to emphasize. It is seen at a glance. Every public assembly in the ancient Church distinguished between its penitents and its faithful communicants. A man was in one class or in the other. He had a right to go to the Holy Table and receive the sacrament of the Body and Blood, or he had not. If he had not, it was known publicly, and he publicly confessed to the whole brotherhood that he was guilty of some greivous sin by the very place he occupied in the church, and by being publicly dismissed before the Communion service began. “Thou hearest the deacon standing up and saying, ‘As many as are under penance depart,’” says Chrysostom.² This confession or *exomologesis* was made day in and out, not to the ears of a priest in a closet, but to the whole body of the faithful. Absolution was given, not on the instant, by a priest, in private, but after months or years of trial, by the bishop, with solemn prayers and supplications, publicly, before all the brethren.

¹ Illi enim, quos videtis agere poenitentiam, scelera commiserunt, aut adulteria, aut aliqua facta immania; inde agunt poenitentiam nam si levia peccata ipsorum essent, ad haec quotidiana oratio delenda sufficeret.—*Aug. De Symbolo*, lib. 1, cap. 7.

² Ἀκούεις ἐστῶτος τοῦ κήρυκος, καὶ λεγοντος, Ὅσοι ἐν μετανοίᾳ ἀπέλθετε· πάντες, ὅσοι μὴ μετέχουσιν, ἐν μετανοίᾳ εἰσὶν· εἰ τῶν ἐν μετανοίᾳ εἰ, μετεχεῖν οὐκ ὀφείλεις· ὃ γὰρ μὴ μετέχων, ἐν μετανοίᾳ ἐστὶ· τίνοσ οὖν ἔνεκεν λέγει, Ἀπέλθετε οἱ μὴ δυνάμενοι δεηθῆναι; σὺ δὲ ἐστηκας ἰταμῶς; ἀλλ' οὐκ εἶ τούτων, ἀλλὰ τῶν δυναμένων μετέχειν, καὶ οὐδὲν φροντίζεις; οὐδὲν ἡγῆ τὸ πρῶγμα.—*Chrysos. Hom. iii. Eph.*

We do not stop to speak of the various stages in the course through which a man passed to reach the Communion table again. There were special prayers, for the penitents in that stage in which they spent most of their probation, said over them, while humbly kneeling, just before the Communion service proper, after which they were dismissed out of the church,—communicants only remaining at Communion. There were some special observances also connected with the penitents during Lent. But, as we see, the whole matter was *public*. In the ordinary lives of this class of her erring children, the Church looked for greater strictness and devotion. They were expected to abstain from all innocent amusements and gayeties; to live quiet and retired; to make the period of their punishment indeed a continuous Lent.

The bishop had it in his hands to shorten the term, for good cause. A man might show more than ordinary zeal; he might risk his life in nursing brethren in a plague; he might impoverish himself by giving of his goods to the poor; he might be in times of persecution imprisoned, or tortured, or even called to die for the faith; and in the trial might show exemplary steadfastness. In all such cases, when sincerity and hearty earnestness were proved by acts independent of the *exomologesis* or public confession, the bishop, naturally, would use his discretionary power, and shorten the time of probation. This shortening was called “an indulgence.” The Church of Rome has transferred the word to her pretended shortening of the pains of a pretended Purgatory, and her advocates are apt to confound the unwary by citing these early indulgences—the shortening of the time of ecclesiastical discipline—as if they were examples of the vain inventions she calls indulgences now.

What was the purpose of this long and painful and humiliating course? Evidently, it was not to win pardon from God. The early Church had no view of human merit which could induce her to put men on this course for that

purpose. She held that a man was pardoned on repentance; pardoned at once, no matter how great and grievous might be his sin. She did not doubt that the very mourners whom she, as yet, refused allowance to enter her doors were absolved by the Lord, their Saviour, if they were sincere. Even those whom, at times, for some atrocious crime she refused her outward communion entirely, she still taught would be, if sincere, forgiven by God.

That she did not consider this exercise of penitence as the means of obtaining Divine pardon is clear from her common habit, declared in various canons, of admitting every one of these penitents to communion when in danger of death, although, upon recovery, she required them to begin where they had been, and finish the regular course. The course of penance was not to satisfy God, but to satisfy her. God knows the heart and *at once* forgives the truly contrite. But the Church does not know the heart. She can only go upon visible facts and things. In truth, a man does not even know his own heart. Not only others, but the man himself, requires to be assured of the sincerity of his repentance by the translation of words into acts, and emotions into life.

The *exomologesis* was, therefore, to assure the Church of the penitent's sincerity, and also to assure the penitent himself. But still more. It was appointed to indicate the Church's horror and shame at his sin, to mark her detestation—faint image on earth of God's detestation in heaven—of wrong and sin, and particularly of wrong and sin done by Christian men inside the Christian fold, who had denied their vows, outraged their position, trampled under foot the blood of the Covenant, and shamed the Lord before His enemies.

When death threatened, the pitiful mother's heart, beating responsive to the pitiful heart of Christ, would restore the penitent and give him the Communion, his *viaticum*, or food for the road, as he entered on the downward path through the dark valley; but should he recover, he found the

stately mother again demanding the visible proof of his sincerity in continued penitence and humility, till the days of his trial were fulfilled.

When those days were accomplished the penitent was solemnly admitted to communion. This occurred generally at Easter, after the prayer and fasting of Lent. On each Ash-Wednesday, it was a common custom to turn out of the Church solemnly, with penitential psalms and prayer, the whole number of the penitents, as a symbolic representation of Adam's expulsion from Paradise, and solemnly to lead them in again, and then to offer up supplications for them, humbly kneeling, that God would grant them a sincere repentance and the grace to make a good and humble confession. For some each Lent would be the last in their course. They would be looking forward to the joys of Easter, doubly joyful to them, because on that high festival they would be restored to the visible means of grace. Now, *this restoration was their absolution*. The last act in this discipline was only an act which had occurred at its beginning, and frequently throughout the whole course. When the time was ended the penitent was solemnly prayed over, as he had been all along, and the bishop laid his hands upon him in prayer for God's mercy.

There is not a trace in all the early Church of any form save this. There was no "absolution," as far as absolution is contained in a form of words, which was supposed to absolve him. He was admitted to the communion from which he had been expelled, and that admission was his absolution. "The peace of the Church," as it was called, was granted when he received the Eucharist. The act of receiving it was so well understood to be the granting of the "peace," that the two phrases are used interchangeably. For, as we said before, the theory is that the Church contains the saved. She grants to all within her, daily, the sacramental assurance of salvation, of mercy and pardon. The man under discipline was refused all such assurances. He

had no part nor lot in them. They belonged to *the faithful*. She had, in her exercise of "the power of the keys," opened the gates of the earthly kingdom of heaven, and turned him out.

And now she exercises the same power, and opens the gates, and brings him in. He is restored to the privileges he had forfeited, to all the means of grace, to all the assurances of salvation, to all the visible declarations in word, prayer, doctrines, and sacraments of the Church of God. As the putting him out was the binding of his sins ministerially, so the bringing him in was the loosing of them ministerially. The form by which he was restored was a matter of indifference. It was the restoration itself which was the single point of importance. It was the restoration itself which was his visible and sacramental absolution, because it brought him again into the kingdom whose law is absolution.

And this was the second great exercise of the power of the keys, as baptism was the first. Both had reference to the opening and the closing of the kingdom of heaven. As sins were forgiven, and a man introduced into the kingdom of mercy in the first place by baptism, so if he fell and was turned out, he could be restored to the same kingdom by this course of discipline, and commonly *only once*, in primitive days.

But the absolution, we wish it distinctly noted, was not in any particular form of words, or any special assurance, but essentially in the fact that the gates were opened, and he was brought in and placed at the Lord's Table.

CHAPTER VI.

THE OFFICER OF DISCIPLINE.

WE have spoken of excommunication and of restoration. The question arises, in whose hands was this administration? There are three orders of ministers in the Church. Was this a duty common to them all, or was it reserved to some one especially? Could a deacon excommunicate or absolve? Could a priest?

The answer, distinct and clear, is that discipline was in the hands of the bishop exclusively. He might employ a priest, a deacon, or even a layman, as his agent or messenger, but he was himself the executive authority, the officer to administer the laws of the Church, with the advice in this respect, as of course in all, of his clergy and laity. The bishop excommunicated—was under penalties if he did not excommunicate—certain evil livers. The purity and honor of the Church were in his hands. He was set to watch for them and to guard them. The bishop decided whether or not a man so excommunicated should be admitted to discipline,—to the *exomologesis*, or public penance. Having admitted him, the bishop decided how long he should thus remain,—appointed the length of his probation, and, for causes, granted him an “indulgence,” as it was called. And finally, when the discipline had been completed, it was the bishop who solemnly, at the altar on Good-Friday, pronounced the penance fulfilled, and by solemn prayer and imposition of hands restored the penitent to the Holy Communion.

In answering this question, the learned Bingham says: "That all the power of discipline was primarily lodged in the hands of the bishop, as all other offices of the Church, is a matter uncontested, and evident from the whole foregoing history and account of the practice of the Church."

And, with reference to the same question, Marshall, in his "Penitential Discipline," says: "The answer is short and clear, that the bishop was the person entrusted with it (the power of discipline and absolution), that his powers were discretionary, as the various practices of various Churches sufficiently prove, and that all authority in these matters was originally derived from him, whoever might occasionally be allowed to exercise it under him."

With reference to this we need only mention the fact that the ancient canons of ancient councils, which prescribe the sins for which excommunication shall issue, and the length of time which shall be required for their public confession, always lay the duty of their execution upon the bishop.

"Let the bishop look carefully over all. Let him consider his dignity, that he is endowed with the power of binding and loosing," say the "Apostolical Constitutions." Again: "To you bishops is it said, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven."¹ And again: "He defiles his diocese, the Church, and the house of God," they tell him, if he neglect to cut off offenders.²

Yet this was a power which, in some of its parts and in

¹ Γνωρίζων, ὃ ἐπίσκοπε, τὸν τρόπον σου καὶ τὴν ἀξίαν ὡς θεοῦ τύπον ἔχων ἐν ἀνθρώποις, τῷ πάντων ἄρχειν ἀνθρώπων ἱέρων, βασιλέων, ἀρχόντων . . . καὶ οὕτως ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ καθέξου τὸν λόγον ποιούμενος, ὡς ἐξουσίαν ἔχων κρίνειν τοὺς ἡμαρτηκότας· ὅτι ὑμῖν τοῖς ἐπίσκοποις εἴρηται· ὃ ἐὰν δῆσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ἔσται δεδεμένον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ· καὶ ὃ ἐὰν λύσητε ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ἔσται λελυμένον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ.—*Apost. Constit.* lib. ii. cap. II.

² Οὕτως ἐβεβήλωσε καὶ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀξίαν, καὶ τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκλησίαν, τὴν κατὰ τὴν παροικίαν αὐτοῦ.—*Ibid.* lib. ii. cap. IO.

certain emergencies, the bishop might delegate to others. But the very canons which permit this vindicate the authority of the bishop as the officer of discipline most clearly.

The second Council of Carthage declares : "To reconcile penitents in the public service is not allowed to presbyters."³ But immediately after it enacts, "If any one be in danger of death, and shall have sought to be reconciled to the divine altar, if the bishop be absent, the presbyter shall consult the bishop, and reconcile the sick person according to his precept."⁴

Again, the third council of Carthage enacts, "A presbyter, the bishop not being consulted, shall not restore a penitent, unless the bishop be absent, and the necessity urgent."⁵

The matter, as is clear from the citations, was in the hands of the bishop as the responsible officer. The Church looked to him to carry out her laws and guard the purity of the flock. But he had large discretion under the law. He could decide, in any individual case, whether or not the rigor of the law might not be mitigated. In ordinary cases he acted personally. He admitted publicly, and publicly reconciled or absolved penitents. But the Church, like her Master, is pitiful. She has the heart of a mother,—not of a tyrant. The bishop might be absent, sick, infirm, in banishment, or in prison ; or a penitent might be taken with sudden danger of death, and the bishop could not attend. In such cases the bishop was authorized to act largely under the law of Christian charity. He might give a general authority in all such cases to his presbyters to act in his stead. Or he

³ Reconciliare quemquam in publica missa, presbytero non licere, hoc omnibus placet.—*Concil. Carth.* II. c. iii.

⁴ Si quisquam in periculo fuerit constitutus, et se reconciliare divinis altaribus petierit, si episcopus absens fuerit, debet utique presbyter consulere episcopo, et sic periclitantem ejus praecepto reconciliare.—*Ibid.* c. iv.

⁵ Presbyter, inconsulto episcopo, non reconciliet poenitentem, nisi absente episcopo, et necessitate cogente.—*Ibid.* III. c. xxxii.

might authorize some of them, and not others; or he might give authority to a special person in a special case.

Indeed, he might not only give such authority to priests, but even to deacons. St. Cyprian does this in *Epistle* xiii.: "If penitents shall be taken with any sudden dangerous sickness, our presence not being waited for, to any presbyter who shall be present, or if no presbyter be at hand, and their departure begins to approach, to a deacon they shall make confession (*exomologesis*) of their sins, that they may receive imposition of hands in penitence, and go to God in peace."⁶

But not only might a priest or deacon be the agent and messenger of the bishop in reconciling the penitent and giving him "the peace of the Church," but even a layman, or a boy. Such is the story told by Eusebius, out of Dionysius of Alexandria, about the Eucharist being sent to Serapion, when he was dying, by the hand of his servant.⁷

There was a certain ground for these extensions of the ordinary law in the practice of the early Church, as can be easily seen on reflection. That practice was to grant reconciliation to the communion of the Church, *publicly*, in the Church. As the confession and penance had been public, so the absolution was public. It was something in which the Church, as a corporation, joined. As baptism, which admitted a man in the first place into the fold, was a public service, so penance and absolution, which restored him to that fold after he had been expelled, were public also,—things in which the whole Church joined. The bishop, in one sense, was but acting in the name of and for the Church in receiving the penitent. It appears from St. Cyprian that, in the

⁶ Si incommodo aliquo et infirmitatis periculo occupati fuerint (poenitentes); non expectata praesentia nostra, apud presbyterum quemcumque praesentem, vel si presbyter repertus non fuerit, et urgere exitus coeperit, apud diaconum quoque exomologesin facere delicti sui possint: ut manu eis in poenitentia imposita, veniant ad Dominum cum pace.—*Cyprian. Epist. xiii.*

Eusebius, lib. vi. cap. xlv.

solemn act of restoration, the bishop and clergy joined in laying hands upon the penitent. "No one," says he, "shall be admitted to come to Communion unless hands shall first have been laid upon him by the bishop *and clergy*."⁸

This being the practice, it seems natural enough that in pressing emergencies the act of declaring the penitent restored to the fellowship of Christ might, by the bishop's authority, be performed by those who joined with him in the act of ordinary occasions. Indeed, it appears to have been a standing principle in the early Church, that whenever death was threatening, any man, who had been admitted to public penance, should be reconciled by any priest who might be called, and should receive from his hands the Holy Communion. The Church, if she errs at all, should err on the side of mercy. The dying penitent was to receive his *viaticum*—the refreshment for his journey—although, if he recovered, he was placed among the penitents again to go through his regular course.

But the law is not for extraordinary cases. Startling exceptions, which are provided for by uncommon means, do not make a rule. And the law and rule was that the bishop, acting in this, as in all, under the law of his position, and with the counsel of his clergy and laity, was the ordinary officer of discipline. In his hands were the keys, even in baptism. Priests and deacons acted under his allowance, and, as it were, by a delegated authority. But in this exercise of this power of the keys he was, ordinarily, the actor personally.

The principle is clearly recognized, and the power of primitive tradition, where primitive discipline has ceased, is clearly shown in the rubric before the Communion Service, in the Prayer Book. There the minister who "repels"

⁸ Nec ad communicationem venire quis possit nisi prius illi ab episcopo et clero manus fuerit impositae.—*Cyprian. Epist. xvi. Hoc in loco confer. Idem, Epist. xv.-xvii. passim.*

any one from Holy Communion for notorious evil living, is not permitted to settle the matter for himself, but is instructed to "give notice thereof to the ordinary (the bishop) as soon as conveniently may be."

The power of excommunication, by the laws and principles of the primitive Church, was not in the hands of the priests. The power of absolution—the taking off of excommunication—was not in the hands of priests either. The doing of either, by priests, as a part of their ordinary function, is a complete reversal of the primitive theory and practice.

CHAPTER VII.

PRIVATE CONFESSION.

WE have said, what is on all hands conceded, that the bishop was the officer of discipline. Indeed, on this principle is founded the whole canon law on the subject of confession and absolution, and the limitations of their exercise, even in the Church of Rome, as one may see from Van Espen.

We have seen that in the primitive Church this discipline was a public affair, and that when the ancients speak of *exomologesis*, they mean this public confession and public absolution as we have explained it. But, besides this, it is true there were private confessions made to individual priests. We propose to examine into the nature of these.

First of all we would say that we are told by the two ecclesiastical historians, Socrates¹ and Sozomen,² that, in the Church of Constantinople, and some others, after the Decian persecution, those who had fallen from the faith were so many that it was an intolerable burden for the bishops, with all their other duties, to examine into and decide upon each individual case liable to discipline. Therefore, to assist him in this work, the bishop selected some prudent, reticent, and grave priest, whose business it was to hear confessions,—the penitentiary priest. To him were to resort all whose consciences were burdened with any weight of guilt. He heard the story, and if the case was one which demanded a public

¹ Book V. chap. xix.

² Book VII. chap. xvi.

penance, the performance of the *exomologesis*, he dismissed the penitent to that duty. If, on the other hand, the sins confessed were not such as render the penitent liable to legal penance, the priest gave him such advice and direction as in his judgment were needed, and himself "absolved" him, that is, declared him entitled, without the penitential discipline, to the privileges of the faithful.

This office, they tell us, continued in the see of Constantinople down to the time of Nectarius, the predecessor of Chrysostom, by whom it was abolished on occasion of a scandal which the penitentiary, with too great zeal, allowed to be published.

From the account of the historians it appears that this office had direct relation to the public penitential discipline which we have here described. It was not established to destroy that discipline, but to facilitate its administration. It did not remove it, it only aided to carry it out. On finding an inconvenience attached to it the office was abolished, but the discipline nevertheless still continued, as is seen by what we have before cited from St. Chrysostom, who came into the see immediately after its discontinuance.

In one sense, therefore, we can scarcely call the confession made to the penitentiary priest a private confession. He was simply the bishop's agent in this part of the bishop's work, and was to conduct matters, not according to his own notion, but strictly according to the canons; and those canons required, for the sins which cut a man off from communion, public penance and public release.

When the office was abolished matters went back to their original condition. The bishop took the work upon himself again, and there were still confession, discipline, and public reconciliation, as of old. But there were certain other cases in which men were urged, of old, and should still be urged, to make confessions.

Men were advised by the ancient writers, when under any perplexities of mind or conscience, or burdened by any

sense of guilt which would not lift, to go to the priest for counsel and advice, and, in the words of the Prayer Book, "open their grief."

In this way St. Basil advises the confession of sins, "because a physician, in order to cure bodily diseases, must be told the symptoms and the cause, and men do not tell these to all, but to them skilled in healing; so confession of sins should be made to those skilful to heal, as it is written, 'Ye who are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak.'"³

There was still another reason for making such confidants of strong spiritual men, namely, that they might decide whether there was need of making confession in its technical sense, that is, undergoing the *exomologesis*.

"Try first," says Origen, "the physician to whom thou art to reveal the cause of thy distemper, and see that he be one who knows how to be weak with one that is weak, and to weep with one that weeps; who understands the discipline of condoling and pitying; that so, at length, if he who hath first showed himself a merciful and skilful physician, shall say anything and give thee any counsel, thou mayest follow it. If he discerns thy sickness to be such as ought to be set out and cured in the public assembly of the Church, and thus others be edified and thyself healed, this is to be done with great deliberation, and with the well-skilled counsel of such a physician."⁴

³ Ἡ ἐξαγόρευσις τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων τοῦτον ἔχει τὸν λόγον, ὃν ἔχει ἡ ἐπίδειξις τῶν σωματικῶν παθῶν, ὡς οὖν τὰ πάθη τοῦ σώματος οὐ πᾶσιν ἀποκαλύπτουσι οἱ ἄνθρωποι, οὔτε τοῖς τυχοῦσιν, ἀλλὰ τοῖς ἐμπείροις τῆς τούτων θεραπείας· οὕτω καὶ ἡ ἐξαγόρευσις τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων γίνεσθαι ὀφείλει ἐπὶ τῶν δυναμένων θεραπεύειν, κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον, Ὑμεῖς οἱ δυνατοὶ, τὰ ἀσθενήματα τῶν ἀδυνατῶν βαστάζετε, τουτέστι, αἰρετε διὰ τῆς ἐπιμελείας.—*Basil in Regul. brevioribus, Resp.* 229.

⁴ Tantummodo circumspice diligentius cui debeas confiteri peccatum tuum. Proba prius medicum cui debeas causam languoris exponere; qui sciat infirmari cum infirmante, flere cum flente, qui condolendi et compatiendi noverit disciplinam: ut ita demum si quid ille dixerit, qui se prius

These cases of private confession were like those provided for in the appointment of the penitentiary priest. A man went voluntarily and sought spiritual help and counsel in spiritual loneliness and weakness. He confessed his condition, that he whose advice he sought might judge of what was necessary to be done. If it were necessary for him to make the confession, if his sin was such as cut him off from communion, he was advised of that, and directed to put himself among the confessed penitents. If his case did not require this treatment, he received the advice and the prayers of his counsellor.

But there were two cases in which private confession was urged where there was no reference to the public discipline of penitence.

St. James writes: "Confess your sins one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed."

The ancients interpret this in its plain meaning, that Christian men should confess mutually to each other and pray mutually for each other. They do not connect it, as the Romanists do, with priestly confession or priestly absolution.

Hincmar, in the ninth century, writes: "Our light and daily sins, according to the exhortation of St. James, are daily to be confessed to those that are our equals; and such sins, we may believe, will be cleansed by their prayers and our acts of piety, if with a charitable mind it is truly said, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.'" ⁵

et eruditum medicum ostenderit et misericordem, si quid consilii dederit, facias et sequaris; si intellexerit et praeviderit talem esse languorem tuum qui in conventu totius Ecclesiae exponi debeat et curari, ex quo fortassis et caeteri aedificari poterunt, et tu ipse facile sanari, multâ hoc deliberatione, et satis perito medici illius consilio procurandum est.—*Origen, Ps. xxxvii. Hom. ii.*

⁵ Quotidiana leviaque peccata, secundam Jacobi Apostoli hortamentum, alterutrum coequalibus confitenda sunt. Quae quotidiana eorum oratione cum quotidianis piis actibus credenda sunt mundari, si cum benigno

The other instance of private confession was when a man had done an injury to another. It was held according to the teaching of our Lord that he should leave his gift before the altar, and first be reconciled to his brother by confessing the injury, and asking to be reconciled.

While, therefore, we may safely say that in the early Church Christians were advised for their souls' health to counsel, in any doubt or difficulty or temptation, those who could help them and enlighten them; while they were exhorted not to conceal their sins, but to lay them open before their brethren, and especially before their pastors; yet such confessions had nothing to do with what is called sacramental confession, and that even they were only matters of advice, and not of obligation; for the men that advise such confessions are just as emphatic on the necessity of confession only to God.

“What have I to do with men,” says Augustine, “that they should hear my confessions as if they could cure all my sicknesses?”⁶

“Tears wash away the sin,” says Ambrose, “that it is a shame to confess with the voice.”⁷

“I do not bid thee bring thy sin on the stage, or accuse thyself to others,” says Chrysostom.⁸ “Reveal thy way unto the Lord; confess thy sins before God.” Again: “Dost

nitate mentis in oratione Dominicâ veraciter dicitur, Dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos remittimus debitoribus nostris.—*Hincmar. Epist. ad Hildeboldum* tom. ii. n. i.

⁶ Quid mihi ergo est cum hominibus ut audiant confessiones meas, quasi ipsi sanaturi sint omnes languores meos?—*Aug. in Confess. lib. x. cap. 3.*

⁷ Lavant lachrymæ delictum quod voce pudor est confitere.—*Ambrose, lib. x. cap. 22, Com. in Luc.*

⁸ Οὐ λέγω σοι, ἐκπέμψουσιν σε αὐτὸν, οὐδὲ παρὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις κατηγορήσονται ἀλλὰ πείθεσθαι (συμβουλεύω) τῷ προφήτῃ λεγοντι, Ἀποκάλυψον πρὸς Κύριον τὴν ὁδὸν σου· ἐπὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ταῦτα ὁμολόγησον.—*Chrysos. Hom. xxxi. in Heb.*

thou confess thy sins to thy fellow servant? Thou only showest thy wound to Him who is thy lord, and He says to thee, Confess thy sins to me in private, to me alone, that I may heal thy wound and deliver thee from thy grief.”⁹

“I confess not with my lips,” said Basil, “but inwardly in my heart where no eye sees. To Thee alone, who seest in secret, do I declare my groanings.”¹⁰

We take it that no one will suppose that by such declarations as these the writer meant to teach men that the discipline which we have described, and which they as bishops put into exercise, according to the canons, was unscriptural or useless. That discipline required confession, and a public confession too.

In using such expressions as we have quoted they must have meant that it was unnecessary to confess, except to God, those sins of “daily incursion” for which daily prayer and daily repentance were the remedy. They were addressing people in the full communion of the faithful, and who had the right to be there; those to whom belonged the promises and the assurances of forgiveness; those who lived under the law of pardon, and who clung to their Lord by a living faith and a living repentance. Such had no *need* to fly to man. They should be strong enough in judgment and clear enough in conscience to trust their souls alone, under the laws of His kingdom, and using His means of grace. They were addressing strong Christian men, who were bravely fighting the battle with their sins, in faith and hope.

But all were not strong. There were the weak, and they

⁹ Μὴ γὰρ τῷ συνδούλῳ ὁμολογεῖς; . . . τῷ δεσπότῃ, τῷ κηδεμόνι, τῷ φιλανθρώπῳ, τῷ ἰατρῷ τὸ τραῦμα ἐπιδεικνύεις; . . . φησὶν “ἐμοὶ τὸ ἀμάρτημα εἶπὲ μόνῳ κατ’ ἰδίαν ἵνα θεραπεύσω τὸ ἔλκος καὶ ἀπαλλάξω τῆς ὀδύνης.” —*Chrysos. Hom. iv. De Lazar.*

¹⁰ Οὐ γὰρ ἵνα τοῖς πολλοῖς φανερὸς γένωμαι, τοῖς χεῖλεσιν ἐξομολογοῦμαι, ἔνδον δὲ ἐν αὐτῇ τῇ καρδίᾳ τὸ ὄμμα μόνῳ σοὶ μόνῳ τῷ βλέποντι τὰ ἐν κρυπτῷ τοὺς ἐν ἑμαυτῷ στεναγμοὺς ἐπιδεικνύω.—*Basil, in Ps. xxxviii.*

had their infirmities. There were those beaten down in the battle; not wounded merely, but sorely wounded; trampled down in the rush of the evil hosts. These they advised to cry for help, not to God only, but also to man; to ask succor of the strong; to seek a comrade's hand to hold them up, a comrade's breast to lean on, a braver and stronger fellow-soldier to drag them from the trampling feet of their spiritual enemies.

So the apparent contradiction is, like many another contradiction, none at all when we understand it. Men, to sustain opposing views, snatch texts and authorities from this side and that, and hurl them at each other, mutually destructive, when there is no opposition at all, if they would but consider the different ends aimed at and the different persons addressed.

The writers of the early Church taught that a Christian man should stand upon the grand freedom of his new birth-right and on the power of his adoption, should boldly come to his Lord with all his weakness and his sins, should consciously live under the law of salvation and grace, and should claim the rights of a son under that law. That is the Christian position forevermore. The steadfast heart, the faithful soul of a redeemed freeman in Christ, a loving member of Christ's kingdom, has a right to the position.

But these same writers knew, also, that all named with the name of Christ are not strong with this strength, or free with this freedom. They are in the kingdom to be helped, these weak and failing ones. And these must be told they have the right to the help of their brethren. "Comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak," cries the Apostolic voice from of old. To whom does it come so strongly as to the priests and pastors of the flock? Can those of faint hearts and feeble knees do better than to turn for aid to those who are set to watch for them for the Lord?

But there are not only the feeble who need help, and the sick who need healing; there are also the false and the faith-

less; the traitors who have denied their Lord, the souls that have made shipwreck of the faith.

These need to confess, not to God only, but to men. They owe it to the Lord whom they have shamed before His enemies, and to His Church which they have disgraced, to confess and bewail their treason. Therefore, the same bishop who preaches to the faithful and true soul that confession need be made to the Lord alone, and to the faithful but weak and true soul that it were wise for it to take a spiritual physician and confess to some faithful priest for his counsel's sake, declares to the unfaithful soul, to the traitor and the apostate, that for him there must be public confession, public humiliation, public satisfaction.

There is no contradiction here at all, and none would have been found if men had not come to search the fathers, as they often come to search the Scriptures, with preconceived theories which they were bound to maintain.

It is scarcely necessary to say that in the cases where men complied with such advice as that given by Origen or Basil, and there was no necessity for public penance, there was also no necessity for absolution. The man was entitled to the Holy Communion, and all other privileges which, as a living member of the Church, were his. His spiritual physician was bound to tell him so. He could, in the ancient Church, be in but one of the two divisions. He was either entitled to all the sacramental assurances of forgiveness, as a loyal member of the kingdom, or he was not. If he was, those sacramental assurances were his continual absolution, for in all the early Church there was no other. If he were not, the priest could not absolve him (that is, admit him to the communion again), for that could only be done after public satisfaction, and by the bishop personally, or by his direction.

Private confession of sins, private consultations with a pastor, the private opening of one's grief to a spiritual physician, recommended by ancient writers and by modern, and

recommended by many arguments, the force of which we would urge at all times, has its distinct place and use in the Church of God. Many need it who do not use it. Many are repelled from its use because of the distorted thing it has been made by a false system. Those who see its use, and are trying to make the use a reality, should be very careful that they understand its limits and its purposes, and that it be not distorted to evil in their hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECLARATION OF ABSOLUTION, OR REMISSION OF SINS.

IF what we have said hitherto on the subject of absolution be correct, we have the means of understanding certain things in our own service books, about which, as it appears to us, misapprehensions of one kind or another are not uncommon.

We have endeavored to set forth the views of primitive antiquity on this subject, not as a matter of antiquarian curiosity, but as having a living bearing upon ourselves. We say, and we have unquestioned ground for the saying, that the Reformation, as far as the Church of England was concerned, was an attempt, more or less conscious from the first, and at last with full consciousness, to turn back for guidance to the earliest and purest ages. There were known evils and corruptions in the Church both in doctrine and practice. They had long been admitted, and by the best men in Europe bemoaned. But how should they be remedied? It was in the hands of the Court of Rome to have settled the question, and so to have preserved still the unity of European Christianity. But as any Reformation would inevitably have struck at the claims and pretensions of that court, as, in fact, that court was itself one of the corruptions that most needed a root and branch reform, it threw its whole weight against a demand which had been loud on all sides for over a hundred years.

It was then left to this, that there should be no reform, and European Christianity should go on from bad to worse,

or else that it should be undertaken in whatsoever way, and by whatsoever instruments were possible. And if there was to be a reform by any instrument, there must be some rule or law of working, some principle on which the business should be conducted.

The Church of England, we hold, was justified, nay, authorized, nay, under penalties, to reform herself, let the consequences be what they might temporarily in the way of a breach of outward unity. If the bishop of Rome and his adherents should ban and curse her for doing her duty and clearing her own skirts from the corruptions which all good men had long deplored, on their own heads be it. She had delivered her soul. And in taking the course she did, she was led to adopt, we confess, unconsciously, sometimes, to some of her reformers (and in this we see God's hand, and not man's) the principle of appealing to antiquity. The work was not to be conducted according to the private notions of private leaders. The Church of England had no Luther, no Calvin, no Knox. No one man was to leave his mark and name upon her. Her standard of orthodoxy was to be no one man's theories. She held that what she rejected were corruptions, and therefore late and new. She sought to restore the original purity over which these corruptions had grown. She was, all along, whether she knew it or not, applying the old rule,—“What is first is true, what is late is false.” *Her* reformation was a restoration. The early Church was her model. Hence the study of antiquity in the English Church, almost from the beginning of the Reformation. Hence her revulsion from scholasticism to simple dogmatism. Hence the broad differences which marked her from the start, and mark her, and all Churches in communion with her, more and more every day, from the mass of mere Protestant sects.

Men talk about “the Church of the future.” With her there is but one Church. The Church of the future is the Church of the past. The Gospel is an “everlasting Gospel”

—the same forever, and the model for all reform ; the measure by which the Church of any age is to dress herself and judge herself is the Church that Apostles planted, watered, and taught—the new-born kingdom of God, that went forth in power eighteen hundred years ago. Church history to us, then, is not a cold record of the past. Investigation of primitive opinions and methods is not bald antiquarianism. We stand in the old paths. We ask after the old ways because they are the true ways. Since, therefore, our very position binds us to primitive Christianity, since we hold it to be the very meaning and logic of that position that the Church holds and teaches the unchangeable faith, we can see no way more legitimate to explain that position, in whatsoever it seems to be misapprehended, than by reference to the primitive model.

Whatever, for instance, the Church may teach in the matter of absolution, she intends shall agree with primitive doctrine. She has no private doctrine on that subject, nor on any other. She absolutely scouts the idea that she can invent doctrine,—that anybody can invent it. There is no such thing as “Anglican doctrine” in her comprehension. She has no place for Anglicanism, more than for any other ism. There is primitive and unalterable Christian doctrine, and that she is bound to guard and teach. What she denies to others she denies also to herself,—the right to tamper with that sacred trust. What she teaches about absolution is identical with what the primitive Church taught. If there is any doubt about it, the doubt may be settled by appeal. We can find no explanation in scholasticism, for the very essence of her view of Christianity is that it is simple dogmatism. We can get no help as to her meaning by questioning the mediæval folk, for she washed herself clean of mediævalism. We can find no light in Romish analogies, for it was Romanism that compelled her to reform. We can go only to the records of the elder Church,—the Scriptures and the writings of the doctors of the first ages.

We have tried to set forth some views and practices of those ages about absolution. We have not quoted as we might, but—not to weary our readers—what we judged sufficient for clearness. In the light of the views and practices we have indicated, and remembering the position to which the Church is committed, we think we find an explanation of certain things in our services.

In the daily Morning and Evening Prayer there is a *General Confession*, and a *Declaration of Absolution or Remission of Sins*. The confession is “general,” because it is made by all the people generally, and because it confesses sins in general, and not in particular. The “absolution,” as it is called, is “to be made by the priest alone.”

We note with regard to this that there is nothing like this part of our service in primitive forms. It was put before the Morning and Evening Prayer at the Reformation, at the second revision of the Prayer Book in 1552. The reason for putting a confession in general terms, and an absolution “by the priest alone,” here, is supposed to have been to make up for or to discourage the private confession and private absolution of the confessional. But whatever be the reason, this portion of the service is *unique*. It is a peculiar feature of the Reformation.

Now, we have seen that there were but really two absolutions in the primitive Church. The one the absolution of the sacraments, the word, and doctrine; that is, perpetual absolution which a man found by living in the kingdom of grace; and the other, the judicial absolution which released him from Church censure and restored him to the privileges he had forfeited. Strictly, indeed, we might class baptism, in the case of adults, with this last, inasmuch as there also there must be a judicial act in passing on the candidate's fitness for the sacrament, on his knowledge, and on the sincerity of his repentance and faith.

Clearly, the absolution in the Common Prayer is not a judicial absolution. The priest who pronounces it decides

nothing. He actually knows nothing to guide him in any decision. He simply announces the law of the kingdom. As an officer of the kingdom he proclaims the conditions on which pardon is granted *in the kingdom*, and he who possesses the conditions has a right to apply to himself the proclamation. The absolution is thrown broadcast to Christian people free—as God’s mercy and grace are free—and whosoever will may take it.

It comes, therefore, under the general head of “absolution of the word and doctrine.” It is meant for those inside the kingdom solely. It applies only to those who have true repentance and a living faith,—to those only in a state of grace and pardon,—to those only who are in living union with Christ the head. It announces, formally and officially, the law, the perpetual, unchanging law of the kingdom, that to those who cling to their Saviour, and fight with their sins, and are Christ’s faithful soldiers and servants, pardon is given daily and hourly for their sins of infirmity and daily incursion, their slips and failings.

We have said this pardon of our service is *unique*. The early Church had it not. Was there, then, no absolution granted in the early Church? We need only refer to what we have before quoted in previous chapters. Absolution was granted as fully and as freely before this addition was put to the services as it is now. It would be granted all the same, and the Church would be exercising her full ministerial duty in the matter, of course, if it were not said at all. For absolution does not consist in any form of words said in any pronouncing of a technical “absolution,” “precatory,” or “declarative,” but in a *fact*,—the fact, namely, that a man is a living member in the kingdom where the *law* is absolution, where every prayer, every psalm, every reading or hearing of epistle, gospel, or lesson, every reception of Holy Communion, gives him sacramental and ministerial assurance that he is *absolved all the time*.

It has seemed to us that so much stress has been laid

upon this *declaration*, that some have lowered the dignity and efficacy of all the Church's dealings in the matter in order to elevate this to a pitch which neither its history nor its doctrinal significance will justify.

If a man be in church unbaptized, the absolution certainly does not absolve *him*. If he be there under Church censure, "repelled" from Holy Communion, the absolution does not restore *him*. It does not absolve him and restore him to the "peace of the Church," though he be really penitent and really believing, should he hear it a thousand times, until he is restored by the act of "the ordinary," to whom his case was referred. And if one be present, guilty of "mortal sin," that is, "mortal sin" in the primitive sense, such sin as would require him to be disciplined and repelled from Holy Communion were it known, it certainly does not absolve him.

It is of great and serious importance that this portion of our service should be well understood and well explained. We have done what no other Church ever did, in placing such an introduction to our Daily Prayer. It is on the souls of all who have the care of souls among us, at their peril, to see that this special provision of ours be not wrested by ignorant people to their ruin. And, seriously, we fear it sometimes is, and that the very teaching of the Church's power of absolution which one hears, and the acceptance of that teaching, while, meanwhile, "absolution" is taken to mean the pronouncing of a special form of words (the scholastic and mediæval sense), leads more than one into deadly error,—the deadly error of habitual sin.

It is no light thing that an adulterer should think that on the next Sunday morning he is absolved from his adultery of Saturday; that natural regret and shame should be mistaken for repentance, and that he should apply to himself an absolution which belongs not to him. It is no light thing that the dishonest man, who makes no restitution, and who renews his dishonesty on Monday, should imagine that this

“absolution” removes his guilt. Daily sinning and daily repenting is the road to hell,—when the sins are known and presumptuous; such sins as, in the purer Church, would have caused a man’s expulsion from the kingdom. The general confession is a confession of the sins of daily incursion, the remnants of the sinful nature against which a man, penitent and believing, is daily fighting and daily crying for help to God. The general absolution is the assurance of God’s grace and mercy to such struggling and faithful souls. It is a deadly delusion when men apply it to themselves to wipe out their sins presumptuous and wilful; the plain breaches of the law and covenant under which they stand.

We need but to consider that all the services of the Church, except, indeed, the baptismal, are intended for “the faithful,”—the baptized, the communicating, those who are in the kingdom and have a right to be there. They are services for believing and penitent Christian folk all through.

This penitentiary introduction to the daily prayers is meant, therefore, for those for whom all the services are meant. It was not intended that this introduction should destroy or take the place of Churchly discipline. It is put as a part of the ordinary prayers of the faithful; of those who are fighting with their sins; of those who have a living hold on Christ, and who have not turned to the devil in the treason of bold transgression. Christ’s ministers “declare and pronounce to *His people*, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins.”

It is well, perhaps, to have a formal announcement, made officially, of the law of the kingdom, on every occasion of public worship. But it is also well known that the Church, which for ages had no such announcement, administered the law just as faithfully without it; that the peculiar form we use since the Reformation, though it may have added clearness to the apprehension of the law, has added nothing at all to the force or validity of its execution; and that, if we

should ever see fit to drop the introduction, and begin, as at first, our service with the Lord's Prayer, the faithful would find just as full an absolution as they find now. For the absolution comes, by the law of the kingdom, to all who fulfil the conditions. Absolution, unless it be judicial, which clearly the Prayer Book absolution is not, is not an act, but a condition. A man lives absolved if he be really a living member of God's kingdom of grace, and every official announcement of that grace is an assurance to him, if he has the right to apply it, that he does so live. The notion that a Christian man vibrates all his life between pardon and condemnation—pardoned this minute, condemned the next; absolved when the priest has pronounced a formula, and bound in sin next day—is a notion, we suppose, no Churchman would hold.

The form of which we are speaking, then, we conclude to be a *Declaration of Absolution*, as it is called. It is not an empty form. It is pronounced officially and authoritatively in the name of Christ, by an officer of His household. It is a proclamation of amnesty flung broadcast to the Christian assembly. Every Christian man truly repentant, truly believing, conscious in himself that he is fighting faithfully with the remnants of sin in his nature, conscious of the working in his heart of the Divine Spirit, by the evidence of his life, has a right to make that official declaration his own, and comfort his heart with it, as much as if he heard it directly from the lips of Christ himself. It is Christ's announcement, and not man's; the very thing the Lord ordered His Church to proclaim to the end of time.

That is to say, it is an "absolution of the word and doctrine," of the same nature as that which is found in all prayer and all worship that embrace the promises of Christ. It lifts from no man a Church censure. It restores no man to communion who has forfeited his place. It does not take the place of Church discipline, nor remove the necessity of bringing forth "fruits meet for repentance," and proving

the sincerity of a man's sorrow and turning. It is for the faithful, and not for the unfaithful. It is not judicial, nor sacramental. It is simply an official proclamation made in the Church of God, to men in the Church of God, of the law by which they stand, and under which they hope to be saved everlastingly. It is not that the pronouncement of the words absolves them then and there, so that whereas they were not pardoned before entering church they are pardoned now, or that when the service has been read by a deacon and the form not used, their sins remain upon them. It is not that there is any magic power in that special formula, so that it does something which is entirely different from what is done by any other part of divine service; so that if it be not said, a Christian man goes away unloosed from his sins.

It is simply the solemn announcement which our Church has chosen, for three hundred years, to make, for one way, in this form, of the law by which God forgives sins in His kingdom, and by which, therefore, His Church may pronounce them forgiven on earth. He takes it to whom it belongs.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WARNING BEFORE COMMUNION.

“And because it is requisite that no man should come to the Holy Communion, but with a full trust in God’s mercy, and with a quiet conscience; therefore, if there be any of you who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein, but requireth further comfort or counsel, let him come to me, or to some other Minister of God’s Word, and open his grief; that he may receive such godly counsel and advice, as may tend to the quieting of his conscience, and the removing of all scruple and doubtfulness.

THIS is the concluding paragraph in the first warning set out to be read before Holy Communion in the Prayer Book. It is the only place in the Prayer Book where anything is said that looks like private confession to a priest, and as the word “minister” is used in it, and not “priest,” it is an invitation equally to “open the grief” to a deacon.

There is no provision made in it, it will be noticed, for what is called, technically, “absolution,”—the pronouncing, that is, of any set form of words. It looks only to a fit preparation for receiving the Holy Communion. In that sacrament is to be found the only possible form of absolution which the Church seems to contemplate in this case. Previously the minister has been instructed to say: “Therefore, if any of you be a blasphemer of God, an hinderer or slanderer of His Word, an adulterer; or be in malice, or envy, or any other grievous crime; repent ye of your sins, or else come not to that holy table.”

Here the awful responsibility of receiving the body and blood of the Lord unworthily is laid upon the conscience of

each for himself. He knows himself to be innocent or guilty of the crimes named. They are all such crimes as in the early Church, whose discipline we have considered, would have incurred excommunication and necessitated public discipline. They are not those sins of "daily incursion" for which daily prayer is the remedy, but sins which are high treason against the King and the laws of His kingdom, sins which cut the sinner off from the number of the faithful.

He is not to come to "that holy table" until he repent first of such sins; and certainly that warning means that he is to make a thorough and complete repentance that will stand the test. It is not a hasty and transitory sorrow, expressing itself in a few cries for pardon, and a few passionate resolutions to sin no more. It is such a repentance as will go to the roots of his life, and which will never need to be repented of; a repentance which will express itself in something equivalent to what the early Christians sought in the *exomologesis*.

To come to such a repentance he will possibly need spiritual counsel and advice. He will need to have his sin set before him in its enormity; its wickedness, to which his conscience is now half dead, exposed in the light of God's Word; the darkness of his heart and life shown to himself by the torch of truth, and the way of return pointed out to him. Therefore he is finally advised to go to some minister of God's Word and open his spiritual condition, and take counsel for what is needful in his case.

What might be needful would be just what the early Church had and what we have not,—the public penitential discipline. We are without that. The spiritual adviser must do the best he can without it. That is our unfortunate condition. But he is, at least, when necessary, to demand something like its equivalent. He has no right to allow the penitent to satisfy his soul with a hasty and huddled repentance which is no real repentance at all.

There is still another direction in the first rubric in the Communion Service which must be taken into account with these passages, in order to understand the full sense of the Church about admission to Communion.

The minister is instructed to repel from the Communion table a man whom he knows to be an open and notorious evil liver, "until he have *openly* declared himself to have truly repented and amended his former evil life." He is also ordered, when he does so, "to give an account of the same to the ordinary" (the bishop).

Here the direction recognizes the organic constitutional law of the Church on this matter, that the bishop, namely, is the officer of discipline. The minister having repelled puts the case out of his hands. He has no power to restore. He submits the question to the bishop. It passes into the bishop's hands to give all directions as to the length of the time of the suspension, the necessary evidences of sincerity and penitence, and the terms on which restoration may take place.

That is to say, the Church makes penitentiary priests of her clergy, each for his own congregation at least. She requires him to guard the purity of the household; to repel from the Master's table whomsoever he knows to be unworthy; and instructs him, after a solemn warning, intended to keep all evil doers and liars away, to invite any one who is in doubt, who cannot see his own way clearly, to come to him or some other minister for counsel and advice, that he may approach God's altar with a quiet conscience at last. But with regard to discipline, to excommunication, and to readmission, she puts the power where the ancient Church put it,—into the hands of the bishop.

This coming for counsel and advice, this recommended opening of one's grief, is done, of course, under the bond of strict secrecy; in official spiritual confidence. The clergyman, save in his capacity as clergyman, knows nothing about what he has heard. It belongs to his knowledge in his spirit-

ual office, and he is under most solemn bonds to keep it as a sacred trust between God and his own conscience, as an officer in God's household.

The American Church says nothing about "absolution" in connection with this matter of spiritual counsel, confidentially and officially. The English Church does. She advises a man to "open his grief that by the ministry of God's Holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution."

The American Church has omitted this reference, and, of course, not without a purpose. She must have had some meaning in dropping out this allusion, as well as in omitting the single instance where the Church of England provides for a private absolution,—namely, in the visitation of the sick.

Whatever may have been the motive or the meaning, it is finally the fact that the American Church has made no provision for the giving of "absolution," that is, for the pronouncing of any form of words technically called "absolution," by her priests, except in the public services.

It is possible that the omission of the reference to absolution in the Exhortation may have arisen from the liability to mistake it. Indeed, we know it has been and is mistaken. It has been interpreted to mean that then and there, as soon as the man has opened his grief, the priest is to pronounce over him the form of words called absolution, and that he seeks counsel and opens his grief for that purpose.

Now, it is not at all clear that "absolution" in this Exhortation in the English Prayer Book means the pronouncing of any set form of words at all. It is "by the ministry of God's Holy Word" he is to receive the benefit of "absolution." It is by far the most rational construction to explain it to mean that the assurance of pardon and deliverance is to be brought to the sinner by citing to him the declarations and provisions made in the Word of God, and by praying with him and for him, pleading those promises. That is, the "absolution" mentioned here, whose "benefit" is to be sought, is, from the phraseology, an "absolution of the word

and doctrine," and not a judicial one, or one that has any reference to Church censure or Church discipline.

Neither does the force of the language convey the idea that this "absolution" is a thing to be obtained at the moment of the consultation, *or*, if we please, the confession. The exhortation is made that "absolution"—deliverance from the bond of sin—may be obtained *finally*. It may be a necessarily long process to obtain it. That will depend on the character of the "grief" opened and the sin acknowledged. Only, "absolution" is the end aimed at, whether near or remote.

But with the theories of "absolution" derived from mediæval sources, and with the interpretation of the word coming from those sources, men were in danger of taking this to mean that a man was to go to a priest and "confess," and that thereupon the priest was to "absolve" him; that this confession and absolution were distinct things in themselves; and that without reference to the word and doctrine, or to the Holy Communion, a man received a sacramental assurance of forgiveness in the technical form of words itself.

Therefore, possibly, it was left out of the American Prayer Book, and considering the danger, we cannot say it was left out unwisely; nevertheless, the object in seeking spiritual counsel and advice, and in opening one's grief to a minister, is just as distinctly "absolution" in the American Prayer Book as in the English. The person seeks these things in order to be absolved from the bonds of his sins; in order to purify his conscience and his heart, and obtain Christ's assurance of forgiveness. And this absolution is obtained effectually by the ministry of God's Word, by the authoritative and official setting forth of the terms of pardon in the New Covenant, and by prayer. If a specific form of words were needed to convey this pardon to a baptized man, then both the Church of England and our own have made ill provision for the performance of their duty to sinners, inasmuch as neither of them, just here, in this consultation or con-

fession recommended as a preparation for Holy Communion, has set forth any form of words at all.

The Church of England has one form of absolution to be given privately in the service for *The Visitation of the Sick*, if the sick person "humbly and heartily desire it." It is formal and declarative,—“I absolve thee.” The American Church has omitted this, because of the danger of its being misunderstood and wrested from its purpose.

We take this absolution to be a judicial one.¹ We have said that in the early Church, whenever a penitent was in danger of death, there was a rule, almost universal, that “the peace of the Church” might be given him. The Church would err on the side of mercy. We have seen that in pressing cases presbyters, and even deacons, in many local churches, had a standing order, in the bishop’s absence, to restore such penitents and give them Communion. And this restoration was judicial. They were put back into the Communion of the faithful.

This peculiar “absolution,” in this service for the sick in the English Prayer Book, is a practice on the ancient rule. The sick man is put among the faithful. Even if the sin he confesses be such as has cut him off from the Communion of the faithful in fact, though not outwardly, considering the danger of his sickness, the merciful Church, on his profession of repentance, restores him, takes him to her arms, and assures him that he is a child yet in his Father’s house, and as a son is forgiven.

The American Church, by omitting this form of words,

¹ The indicative and peremptory way of absolving is also agreed to be of small standing in the Church. . . . We use it but once, and that is in our Office for the Visitation of the Sick; in which case we should, as I humbly apprehend, insist with the penitent that, upon his recovery, he do submit to a course of discipline before he approach the Holy Communion; which will bring up the case to a pretty near resemblance to that of the ancient Clinical Absolutions.—*Marshall’s Penitential Discipline of the Primitive Church*, p. 159.

has assuredly omitted none of her Churchly powers or functions. It is certain she did not intend to. It is equally certain, therefore, that she considers the performance of this function of reconciling sick penitents to her communion, and assuring them that their sins are forgiven, quite amply and effectively provided for in that service, without any such form. And it follows inevitably from her action that she, like the early Church, does not consider either ministerial or judicial absolution to be conveyed by any set form; but the one, in the use of all the means of grace in the kingdom as an habitual steady gift; and the other by an act, formal or informal, which restores a man to communion, and consequently to all the assurances of absolution in the word, prayers, and sacrament.

The priest who has the cure of souls in the American Church is put in the position of the spiritual physician spoken of by Origen and Basil, as we have quoted. He is called upon to hear the confession of sin; the opening of a sore spiritual grief; the stating of a case of soul-sickness. If it be the revelation of such sins and sickness as are not deadly; such as would not, had the Church a discipline, subject the penitent to that discipline; such as do not cut the sinner off from the communion of the faithful; such as are not treason against the King; in short, not presumptuous and confessed notorious evil living, he has the power to consult with the penitent, to advise him, to comfort him and direct him, and to remit him at once to all the means of grace; to assure him that if he be truly penitent these means are all his own to use, and that he is under the law of forgiveness, and has the right to claim ministerial assurance of it in public prayer and worship, and in the Holy Communion.

But if the "grief" opened be a plain coarse sin, such a sin as without disguise makes open and deadly breach in the covenant,—theft, fraud, perjury, blasphemy, malicious evil-doing, fornication, adultery,—what is he to do then?

Is it very easy to answer? In the primitive Church, as

we have seen, such cases would have been disciplined through some tract of time. We have no such system. Is the "minister," therefore, to take it upon himself to restore such to communion?—judicially to absolve them by continuing them in outward communion, and giving them the outward right to the continued absolutions of the word and doctrine?

We fear this is the way each priest feels himself authorized to act. Practically, he assumes himself to be the officer of discipline in his own field, and even if he be consulted by some not of his own charge, the officer of discipline in any other field in or out of the diocese. In the absence of any system of discipline, each priest, and each deacon even (if he be, as he often is, in sole charge of a congregation), takes it upon himself to act as the ordinary officer of discipline, the executive of Church law, and that without a thought of consulting the bishop in whose hands this was reserved through all antiquity.

Now, it is easy enough to see what *ought* to be done in such a case by the principles of the primitive Church, and by the analogy of the only rule on the subject in our own.

If the minister shall know any to be an open and notorious evil liver, he is directed to repel him from communion, until he give evidence of repentance and a changed life, immediately informing the bishop, who thenceforth has the case in his hands as to the evidence required, and the length of time and the conditions of restoration.

Now, if the minister "know" this by confession of the man, is he not bound to act in the same way, equally? The cases are not rare where a man is known to be by everybody, except the minister almost, a notorious evil liver, and the minister only learns the fact by the man's own acknowledgment. Shall he then *not* repel? Shall he then take it upon himself, if he does repel, to restore of his own motion? Shall he usurp the use of the keys in this respect?

Or if, again, the evil living be not "notorious," but carefully kept secret, and the man confesses to an evil living to

which he has added sin on sin—lying, hypocrisy, falsehood in word and deed, in order to keep it secret, making it the more deadly because the more secret—shall the minister consider himself competent to deal with this worse case, when the Church refers him to the bishop in the other case, by no means so bad,—not so bad because it has not involved lying and hypocrisy and mean knavery, and is therefore *known?*

We consider it clear, from the whole analogies of the case, that here the minister should refer the case to the canonical officer of discipline, that he should hear the confession, and if it be not of gross breaches of the Ten Commandments, of coarse black sins, about which no conscience can mistake, he should assure the penitent that if he be truly repentant the means of grace will be his cure,—should remand him with rebukes, prayers, and counsels, to their better use hereafter. But if the sins be crimes—gross, plain outrages, such as we have mentioned—he should refer him to the bishop, as he is bound to do if the outrages are open and notorious.

Of course he is pledged to sacred confidence, and of course the bishop is so also. And of course the man can only, in such case, be advised to resort to the bishop, not compelled. But meanwhile he should forbid him the communion

It is true this puts the bishop upon a work which seems to be little thought of as belonging to his office at present. But there are few who will examine the question, who will not be struck with the fact that the conception of that office commonly held among us is quite a different one from that which we find in the early Church, and, for that matter, in the Book of Common Prayer.

At all events, to keep up any discipline which shall not be a disgrace to a living and pure Church, it cannot be left to the notions of individual ministers. There must be some uniform administration of any law. We could not well have a man excommunicated from St. John's for something which

would be no fault at all in St. Luke's, in the next street. We cannot have as many disciplines as parishes, and therefore in any interpretation of the minister's duty in this regard we must take into account the primitive and Catholic rule that the bishop, and not "the minister," is the ordinary,—the officer of discipline.

CHAPTER X.

THE ESSENCE OF ABSOLUTION.

IN the Church of God for many ages there was no form of absolution except *prayer*.

In the ancient penitential system, of which we have spoken, the penitents were prayed for, with imposition of hands, at every stage of their probation. When they had passed through the period of that probation, and were admitted to Communion, it was by prayer and imposition of hands. No variation was made from the accustomed forms. There was no pronouncing of any set form of words which could be called an absolution. The absolution consisted in restoring the penitent to Communion, and apparently in nothing else.

And this absence of any special form of words supposed to convey by themselves absolution, continued long after the original penitential discipline, with its public humiliation, had ceased and given way to private confession and private absolution. As late as the thirteenth century the priest prayed for the penitent, after his confession, that God would pardon him and bring him to everlasting life.

The ancient penitentials, down to the century named, contain no form save the form of prayer; and even after the judicial form, "I absolve thee," was introduced in the West it was always joined with prayers before and after.

At present, in the Church of Rome, penitence is a sacrament, to the reception of which sacramental confession to a priest is necessary. The Council of Trent teaches that in

no other way are sins forgiven—mortal sins—except in this sacrament. To it applies almost exclusively—altogether exclusively after baptism—the force of the words: “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” The Eucharist conveys sacramental remission only for “venial sins.” For “deadly” sins, which in the true theological sense are *all* sins persisted in, there is no sacramental gift of forgiveness except in penance.

And the *form* of penance (all sacraments consisting of *matter* and *form*) is found in the words, *Ego te absolvo* (I absolve thee), just as in baptism the essential words are, “I baptize thee in the name,” etc. Without those words there is no absolution. With them there is absolution although none others be uttered.

In Session XIV. chap. iii., we read: “The Holy Synod, moreover, teaches that the force of the Sacrament of Penance, in which especially its power stands, is placed in these words of the minister, *Ego te absolvo* (I absolve thee), to which, indeed, by custom of Holy Church, certain prayers are commonly joined, notwithstanding these regard not the essence of the *form* itself, nor are they necessary to the administration of the Sacrament.”¹

It is also the teaching of the Council that the priest sits as *judge*, and as judge decides the case. Therefore in chap. v.²

¹ Docet praeterea Sancta Synodus, sacramenti poenitentiae formam, in qua praecipue ipsius vis sita est, in illis ministri verbis positam esse: *Ego te absolvo*, etc., quibus quidem de Ecclesiae Sanctae more preces quaedam laudabiliter adjunguntur, ad ipsius tamen formae essentiam nequaquam spectant, neque ad ipsius sacramenti administrationem sunt necessariae.—*Sessio XIV. c. iii.*

² Ex institutione sacramenti poenitentiae jam explicata universa Ecclesia semper intellexit institutam etiam esse a Domino integram peccatorum confessionem, et omnibus post baptismum lapsis, *jure divino* necessariam existere, quia Dominus noster Jesus Christus, e terris ascensurus ad coelos sacerdotes sui ipsius vicarios reliquit tanquam praesides et *judices*, ad quos omnia mortalia crimina deferantur, etc.—*Sessio XIV. c. v. De Poenitentia.*

of the same session the necessity of full and unreserved confession is argued, that he may have wherewithal to judge upon. Sins are not confessed mainly that the conscience may be instructed and the sinner put on a new course of life, and his "grief" removed, but that he may be judicially absolved by the judicial formula.

In nothing more closely than in its decrees about penance is the Church of Rome at war with antiquity; and yet, as in all its doctrine, so in this, it gives a caricature of primitive teaching.

For if the theory about the *form* of the sacrament be true; if the words "I absolve thee" be the only words which convey remission of sins in the exercise of the power of the keys; then nothing is clearer, by the full and free admission of Romish writers themselves, than that, for about twelve hundred years, the Church never exercised the power of the keys at all on baptized people, and no man was, in all that time, absolved; since it was confessed on all hands that the form essential to the conveyance of absolution was never used!

It is clear, from this illustration, that we shall find in the modern Church of Rome no light upon the doctrine of absolution as held in the Church primitive, and consequently none on the same doctrine as held by our own. The same words are used, but they are used in senses totally different, and the unwary should take heed that they be not misled by the sameness of sound.

The Church advises people who cannot quiet their own consciences to go to some godly minister and open their grief, because a man ought to come to Holy Communion with a quiet conscience. That is, the healing of a sick soul is the purpose. The minister is a *physician*. The fathers, as we have quoted, advised the same. In their view the confessor was the spiritual physician. In the Church of Rome the confessor is a *judge*—sitting in the place of God—*Judicat ut Deus*,—he judges as God, and as God absolves. In fact,

the Trent Council *anathematizes*, in Canon VII.³ of the session already quoted, those who teach "that confession is only necessary for instructing and consoling the penitent, and that it was formerly observed for the purpose of the canonical satisfaction imposed," and not also "by divine right necessary to salvation."

Morinus, the author of the great work "De Poenitentia," a magazine of all history and learning on this subject, confesses (as quoted by Marshall in his "Penitential Discipline") that "he could hardly lay down any one proposition concerning the reconciliation of penitents among the ancients but what must differ from the modern usage" in his own communion.

Tested by the historic test, the doctrine of penance, including confession and absolution, as taught in the decrees and canons, and in the catechism of the Council of Trent, is heresy from first to last. The penance there is not the penance of antiquity. The confession there is not the *exomologesis* about which the ancient canons tell us. The absolution there was never heard of for twelve centuries, and even after grew only gradually into use.

To understand the primitive doctrine of absolution, a man must free his mind from the notion that it consists in any form of words whatever,—for such form of words he cannot find. The notion that remission is conveyed only by pronouncing any form of words, declaratory, precatory, indicative, or what not, is a relic of scholasticism for which no ground is found in antiquity. In removing a Church censure, in restoring a man to the communion he had forfeited, considering the act as one done in the court external of the visible Church, it would seem as though we might expect such an expression as "I absolve thee," meaning thereby

³ Si quis dixerit . . . eam confessionem tantum esse utilem ad erudendum et consolandum poenitentem et olim observatam fuisse tantum ad satisfactionem canonicam imponendam . . . anathema sit.—*De Sanctissimo Poenitentiae Sacramento, Can. VII.*

“I free thee (as an officer of the Church) from Church censures, and restore thee again among the flock,” and yet we find no such expression even in that connection.

When the penitent had gone through his course he was admitted, as a matter of course; that was all, and there was no need of so many words. The outward act of going among the communicants again was his absolution. The Church had bound him with the censures and the canonical bonds of his penance, and now, having completed his trial and satisfied her, she loosed him; but his loosing was not in the force of a phrase, but in his restoration to communion.

The Church of Rome has so bewitched and bemuddled the matter that she reverses the process. She looses first, and, in the sense of the primitive Church, *binds* afterward. For the bond which the Church puts upon a man is the bond of *discipline*; some works of penance to be done, some time to stand excommunicated and under censure. And she looses when she takes off this bond, removes this censure, and restores a man again to the full privileges he had forfeited.

But the universal practice in the Church of Rome is to absolve first, and then inflict the penance afterward! The absolution is conferred in the view of a penance which yet remains to be performed. The man is restored to Communion, and yet is bound under penance! And that penance usually consists of prayers and fastings and almsgiving,—such good works as all Christians are bound to perform, and which cannot, in the Christian sense, be called punishment.

In the Roman sense our Church has no absolution at all for sins after baptism, for every deadly sin must be confessed and absolved in sacramental confession and absolution; otherwise there is no pardon. Even the Holy Eucharist, as we have seen, only gives sacramental remission of venial sin, and the words “I absolve thee” are the words of power. Unless those words are pronounced the sinner is not pardoned. Just as the baptismal formula is necessary to a valid

baptism, so these words are necessary to a valid absolution; and without them no man's sin is remitted.

If any talk about "sacramental confession" or "sacramental absolution," they should know whereof they speak. They should understand that the full doctrine to which these phrases refer and on which they stand is, that confession and absolution, *with a specific form of words*, are parts of a sacrament especially instituted to convey forgiveness of post-baptismal sin, and that such sin is forgiven in *no other sacrament or means of grace whatever*.

Our Church has left penance out of the number of the sacraments. She has omitted its *form* from every one of her services. She nowhere authorizes her minister to say, "I absolve thee." She nowhere teaches that forgiveness of sin is found alone in any special sacrament.

Shall we say, then, that she does not exercise the power of the keys? that she has abdicated one of the functions of the Church Catholic? that she has deprived herself of the power of speaking peace and pardon to the burdened soul? that she cannot cleanse the conscience, or say to the trembling penitent, "Thy sins are forgiven thee," or, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more?"

We confess, indeed, that she is not carrying out the ancient law of discipline; that she is far from attempting it even, at present; but we hold that what she has of it is right as far as it goes, and that, judging from the fruits, it is better, feeble though it be, than the corrupt caricature of the ancient discipline practised by Rome, which, with her impudent falsification of all history, she declares to be "from the beginning."

But our Church does distinctively and publicly claim that she is in the full exercise of the power of binding and loosing, as that power is conferred. She commits it to her priests at their ordination, unless that solemn ordination be a sham. She proclaims it to her people in every public service. And we hold distinctly that the power on earth to forgive sins is in her hands, and is everywhere exercised by

her, as the ancient Church understood that power. We hold also that the priest who goes outside her authorized forms to foist in, in private or in public, any forms or methods under the notion that they are more valid, or that he needs to supplement what the Church authorizes, is in error on the doctrine of absolution, and is guilty of an insult and a treason to the Church whose commission he bears.

For the Church, after the ancient example, practises but two absolutions: one, the absolution of the word and doctrine and sacraments; the other, the judicial absolution, which is exercised when a man's case is decided upon by competent authority, after he is excommunicated, and he is restored to communion again.

The first is exercised all the time by every clergyman in the performance of his functions. He gives sacramental absolution and remission of sins in baptism,—even a deacon does so. He pronounces it in “the declaration of absolution,” in the prayers, in the public reading of Holy Scripture, in the Litany, in the blessing of peace. All his life long he is proclaiming the great amnesty; passing over to all that will receive it, sealed and signed, the great forgiveness of the Redeemer, the great absolution of the Eternal Priest, whose earthly agent he is. He can teach nothing in all his ministry without teaching absolution, for the whole business of the Gospel to the end of time is the deliverance of men from their sins.

A man in the Church, living in faith and repentance, finds absolution in every act of worship, finds the confirmation of the great law coming home to him in every voice the Church utters. He is in a “state of salvation,” and that is a state of forgiveness. He is absolved always. The Church pronounces him so absolved, by the command of her Lord. That her acts are ministerial, declarative, sacramental, takes nothing from their validity. That is all they can be. She can only act out on earth a transcript of God's action in heaven. She can only, as the kingdom of God, carry out

God's law. And as God's law is pardon to repentance, so is hers. She walks daily with that law in her hands and asks all to come and make it their own. She cannot force it on any. It is a free gift. It must be taken as a free gift.

But she guards her children from supposing that absolution from their sins comes to them from one form and not from all, that it is a thing which they have to-day and cannot have to-morrow, that they are this hour the children of wrath, and the next moment, by the utterance of a stereotyped formula, children of grace. She does not dare to play fast and loose in this way with human conscience and Christian character. She instructs her children to claim their birthright, and hold that birthright to be salvation from their sins.

If any be troubled in mind or conscience she advises them, in the ancient way, to consult with some wise spiritual physician who shall put them on a course to ease their consciences and restore them to the sense of God's favor and pardon again. But she authorizes no *formula*, lest, as has come to pass in Romanism, forgiveness should be attributed to the formula of a moment, and not to the fact that one is living daily under the law of forgiveness. Her instructions look to bring the penitent back under that law where is peace and comfort and calm. We believe that she holds, that is, as the ancient Church held, that a Christian man is forgiven always *by the law of his position*, and that the absolutions—ministerial, declarative, and sacramental—which the Church administers, committing them more or less to every order of her ministry, are his, to make his own; his to use, that he may live up to that law by holding him to its conditions; his to accept as personally and specifically his own, when he finds his conscience condemns him not.

But the Church, like every living Church, must have *judicial* absolution as well. And this can have reference *only* to the outside court of Churchly discipline. It may be necessary to repel a man from communion for his outrageous

and presumptuous breach of the Christian covenant. To restore him is to act *judicially*. This power the Church has, as of old example, lodged in the hands of the bishop. The clergyman who repels a man at once informs his diocesan. If this man goes on attending Church he hears the *Declaration of Absolution*, so called, pronounced again and again, but it does not absolve him. The absolution of word and doctrine and sacraments has no reference to him. It belongs to those inside, and he is yet outside. What he first needs is the judicial and official absolution which shall remove Church censure and restore him to communion.

And it would seem as though this was, by the Church's intention, placed in the hands of the bishop. True, indeed, he may accept the priest's action as his own; may acquiesce in his arrangements, and be thoroughly satisfied with his treatment of the case. But the action is valid, not because the priest did it, but because the bishop accepted it, and when the man is restored, he is restored by the bishop's authority, expressed or implied.

And just here comes in something which may explain to us the difference between the accidents and the essence of absolution. The bishop, on being officially informed of a case of repulsion, may conduct it altogether by *letter*; may be perfectly satisfied so to do; and after due trial, and being satisfied of the penitent's sincerity, may restore him to communion *by letter*,—the mail may actually convey a judicial absolution. Nay, more, if it be desirable that the penitent be admitted to communion again on a certain day—when one of his children receives first Communion say, or when his aged father or mother is with him temporarily—and the mail cannot convey the permission in time, the restorative sentence might conceivably be sent by telegraph. So far, in the ancient Church theory, or our own, is absolution from consisting in any special formula, announced in any special way.

The man entitled to Holy Communion, entitled to sit at

God's board and partake as a son of his Father's table, is, in the opinion and by the law of the Church on earth, an *absolved man*. He sits at that feast, and the banner over him is love,—God's infinite love. To admit him to that table is to *absolve him*, do it in what form we may. And it has been so held in the Church universal always. He may not be absolved inwardly. He may be eating and drinking damnation to himself, but the Church visible can only act visibly. He is *there*; and in her eyes he has the "wedding garment." Only the King himself can see whether he has it really. As far as Church censure and Church absolution go, the man at the Holy Communion kneels absolved. Howsoever the Church admits him, therefore, she accepts the fact, and so considers him. Admission to her Communion is what constitutes the *essence* of her absolution in either form.

CHAPTER XI.

ITS NEED.

WE have been speaking of the power left among men to forgive sins, by our Lord, and its meaning and limitation.

Now, there is no positive institution of Christianity that has not a necessity for its existence in some need of human nature. Our Lord, the Master of men, knows the creatures He has made, and when He sends them a religion, that religion will be exactly fitted to their nature and position. We may say from this side of the question, that the power of absolution was left in the Church because this power was absolutely necessary to the well-being of men.

Let us see if we cannot discover the want in humanity which this positive institution is intended to supply.

When once a man is borne down by the sense of his sin, he has but two courses before him: he must either turn and repent and amend, or he must go headlong to ruin. There is nothing that leads to the latter result so surely as the sense of shame and disgrace before men. When a man has no prospect of being restored to the respect of his kind, he is reckless. He has fallen so low that he has reached bottom. He can do nothing. You may tell him God forgives him, but your words have no meaning; because man will not forgive him. Make an outcast of him; close every door against him; refuse him the clasp of every human hand, the greeting of every human tongue; let all shrink from him as from a

moral leper, and God's forgiveness will sound to such an one like the emptiest talk.

Men have this fearful power to bind on earth. They can hand a man over to utter despair and shame. They can brand the sinner with the brand of Cain; can send him forth with the curses of his kind upon him, and assure his ruin because they take away all hope.

It is a fearful power, and sometimes it is fearfully exercised. Society sometimes bars out the fallen and secures their ruin by refusing to open its doors to any return. But society is very capricious. Its laws are not God's. It visits wrong-doers very unjustly, letting one escape, and exacting the last farthing from another far less guilty.

The condemnation of men shuts up the fallen to his sins; and the forgiveness of men is the first thing, in many a case, necessary to his deliverance. Man's verdict is, indeed, not always God's; and yet man's verdict has often the power of executing itself, as if it were Divine.

To tell a sinner crushed down by shame that men forgive him; that they will accept his repentance and restore him to his forfeited place, and try him again, is the only way, often, to give him any hope in the mercy of God. For what man forgives, surely God can and will forgive. What man *refuses to forgive*,—how can the Holy God forgive what sinful man does not?

Men have this power in a degree, by nature, over men. And there is nothing for which the sinner often yearns so pitifully as the sound of forgiving words from human lips. It will drive a sinner often to confess a sin which no human creature need know but himself. He cannot bear his load in loneliness. He may read God's promises. He may hear them. He may, after a sort, believe them. He may try to make them his own. But he is not content. He wants to hear a human judgment, and thus forestall the Divine. He wants assurance from human lips that he is forgiven, or that he can be. He is driven to confess by the necessity of his

own heart. He cannot bear his crushing load alone. He longs to tell it all, and ask, "Will God forgive me?" "Could *you* forgive me?" and the assurance that a man forgives him—*can* and *will* forgive him—is the assurance that God forgives. The heavy load rolls off. Despair goes, and trembling hope takes its place in the darkened heart.

Let a man weighed down with a sense of guilt go to some good man whom he reverences, in whom he has confidence, whose conscience he believes pure, whose life he knows spotless, and let him tell this man of his sin. He dreads to do it. The very purity and integrity to which he wants to appeal fright him, sinner that he is, away. But he overcomes his dread and shame and reveals his sin. At that moment the man he has consulted holds in his hands, as the sinner feels, the judgment, almost, of heaven. He represents, to the guilty, man's judgment and God's. He stands for the sacredness of the law and for the executioner of justice or of mercy.

And this good man says: "I forgive you." He makes no appeal to anything higher. He acts simply as one man dealing with another. He claims no priestly prerogative. He says simply: "I have heard your story. Your guilt is great. Your penitence should be so. I believe it is. And because of that sorrow and broken-heartedness, I, as one man dealing with another, declare that I can and do forgive you. Detesting as I do your sin, I yet consider it forgiven, and hold you my friend as before. There is my hand upon it."

We might call this the merely natural and human action in such a case—a thing that might be done by any good man whatever; and yet one can see how, in such a case, the assurance of the man's forgiveness would be almost the assurance of God's.

For would not the sinner say: "If my friend, honest, upright, and true, forgives, I need not despair. God will forgive what man can. This good man does not loathe me

nor leave me. He still holds me his friend, even in his grief at my fall. If I find this the measure of human kindness and pity, shall I distrust the tenderness and pity that are infinite and divine?"

Now, it was to meet this longing in human nature for man's judgment upon man's sins—for man's pity and pardon as types of God's—that, of necessity, in God's kingdom, is found the "power on earth to forgive sins."

Any Church, to do her duty on this earth, among men, as men are, must hold and exercise the power of hearing confession and pronouncing pardon. She could not be a Church without it. She stands, as we have said, God's representative on earth; the exponent here of the law and morals of heaven. She is sent to deal with men with such wants as we have seen; with men burdened by lonely loads of guilt which they yearn to lay down at some human feet; with men who want human judgment to assure them of the divine; with sinners who want to hear pity and pardon from human lips, that they may have trembling faith to believe pity and pardon can come also from God.

And the vague power which, in a way, as we have seen, any good man does under certain circumstances exercise, is made, in the kingdom, a definite and precise power, which speaks with the voice of authority and in the name of God.

There is perhaps no power which the Church possesses which she is so cowardly in the using as this power of dealing with sins. And the cowardice comes from her own unfaithfulness. A Church, standing upon and living by God's heavenly law, can be very bold in dealing with sin, and very pitiful in forgiving it. But a Church yielding to worldliness and accepting the law of the earth, can deal but weakly with the punishment of sin, and her forgiveness of it is more from criminal carelessness than from divine pity.

For it is one of the laws of forgiveness that none forgive so freely and so fully as the pure. None forgives like the holy God. Among men none forgive like the cleanest-

hearted. And among Churches the worldly and lukewarm Church will be the Church that deals most hardly with the known and disgraced sinner. She is careless about purity so long as impurity is concealed, but she is so conscious of her own faithlessness that she cannot venture to be forgiving when the sin is also a shame. Only a pure and therefore a brave Church can dare to be that. The worldly Church always "vindicates her purity" by being coldly and cruelly unforgiving to "the publicans and harlots." The Church alone that is holy, somewhat like her Master, can, like her Master, afford to forgive both.

We have said that the Church is an outpost of God's kingdom here on earth. Her laws are not the world's laws, nor her morals the world's morals. She has her own code of both, and it should be a transcript from heaven.

Now, this body, claiming to act and stand upon the law of heaven, and to deal with men in God's name, and by God's authority, presents herself to sinners, such as we have seen them.

She is ready to hear their confessions because they must confess to find peace. She is ready to pronounce them forgiven and take them to *her* arms as the most emphatic and sufficient assurance that God forgives them and takes them to His. They are not tried by one conscience, no matter how unerring. Her voice is the voice of all good men. Her conscience is the conscience of all good men. And if the sinner can take the word of one good man whom he reverences as almost to him the pardon of God, how much more will he take the corporate voice of the body that represents not only all good men's opinions and all good men's conscience, but also the thought and judgment of the Lord? The body that represents on earth the will and the ways of God does not cast him out to despair. Sinner as he is, she is not too holy to take in such as he. The voice of all the good pardons him. The arms of all the good are ready to receive him. Stained and spotted though he be, the Church

which reads those flaming Ten Commandments, as her eternal moral rule, consigns not to a hopeless fall the man who may have broken them all, and who yet will come trembling in fear and penitence, and unburden his soul of guilt.

For it is the whole Church that absolves. She may commit the exercise of the power, as she does, to one class of her officers. But they represent her and act for her, and their voice is her voice. When the executive pardons, he pardons for the whole State. His act is the act of the State. Nevertheless, no man in the State can pardon except the highest executive. The whole authority of the State in this matter speaks through the chief magistrate. A man pardoned by him is pardoned everywhere.

A curious illustration of the idea that the Church is really the absolver—the Church as a kingdom and commonwealth—is found in the “Sarum Ritual,” from which the absolution in our own Communion Service is taken.

In that mediæval ritual the priest confessed the people, and the people immediately in the same words confessed the priest; the priest absolved the people, and the people absolved the priest.¹ Both used the same words.

¹ *Sacerdos, respiciens ad altare, Confiteor Deo, beatæ Mariæ, omnibus sanctis, vertens se ad chorum, et vobis peccari nimis cogitatione, locutione, et opere; mea culpa. Respiciens ad altare, Precor sanctam Mariam, et omnes sanctos Dei, respiciens ad chorum, et vos, orare pro me.*

Chorus respondeat ad eum conversus, Misereatur, etc.

Postea, primo ad altare conversus, Confiteor, etc.; deinde ad sacerdotem conversus, ut prius sacerdos se habuit; deinde dicat sacerdos ad Chorum: Misereatur, etc.

The “Misereatur” is the Absolution, as the “Confiteor” is the Confession. It is pronounced by the choir, representing the people, over the priest, as by the priest over the choir, as above.

I translate the “Misereatur:”

“May God Almighty have mercy upon you and remit to you all your sins. May He deliver you from all evil, and preserve and strengthen you in all good, and bring you to everlasting life. Amen. May the Almighty and merciful God grant you absolution and remission of all your sins, space for true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

The power of absolution is not a thing conferred for the aggrandizement or glory of any class of men or any set of officers. It is not a power which can be used arbitrarily, or withheld at the will of him who exercises it. It is given for mercy to men, for the good of men, to fill the needs of men, and is to be used under due responsibilities and solemn sanctions. An unjust excommunication is no excommunication. An unjust absolution is no absolution. Neither the one nor the other can be flung about at random by him into whose hands, as a solemn trust, the Church has committed them. Both are powers standing under law, and the exercise of each is limited and measured by law. Absolution, like the Sabbath, is made for man, and not man for absolution. All that belongs to it is a part of the blessed Gospel which was sent for man's salvation. The salvation, and that only, is the end of its use.

The Church cannot allow this power to drop from her hands without failing in an essential of her duty. She is bound also to expel the guilty, bound to exercise the power of the keys, as an essential part of her business in this world.

We have become confused on the matter. We have seen God's beneficent gift of pardon, left with His Church, so abused that its exercise has come to be called "priestly arrogance;" that the very claim that Christ's word remains a living word yet, has come to be understood as an assumption of human conceit and pride.

For ourselves we believe that word to be living. But a Church to pardon must be also a Church to punish. The two are correlative. The absolutions of a Church that never binds are meaningless absolutions in the eyes of men. To have this blessed power of absolution realized and used, to have it a living and loving thing that opens the gate of hope to the guilty and the door of peace to the sore troubled, we must also have the exercise of the judicial power of condemnation.

A holy and righteous Church putting in force God's spot-

less laws, vindicating their purity and majesty in her discipline without fear or favor, on beggar and prince alike, is alone the Church whose absolution sounds somewhat like God's, and which speaks with the echoes of heaven when she proclaims to the broken-hearted, "Thy sins are forgiven."

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